

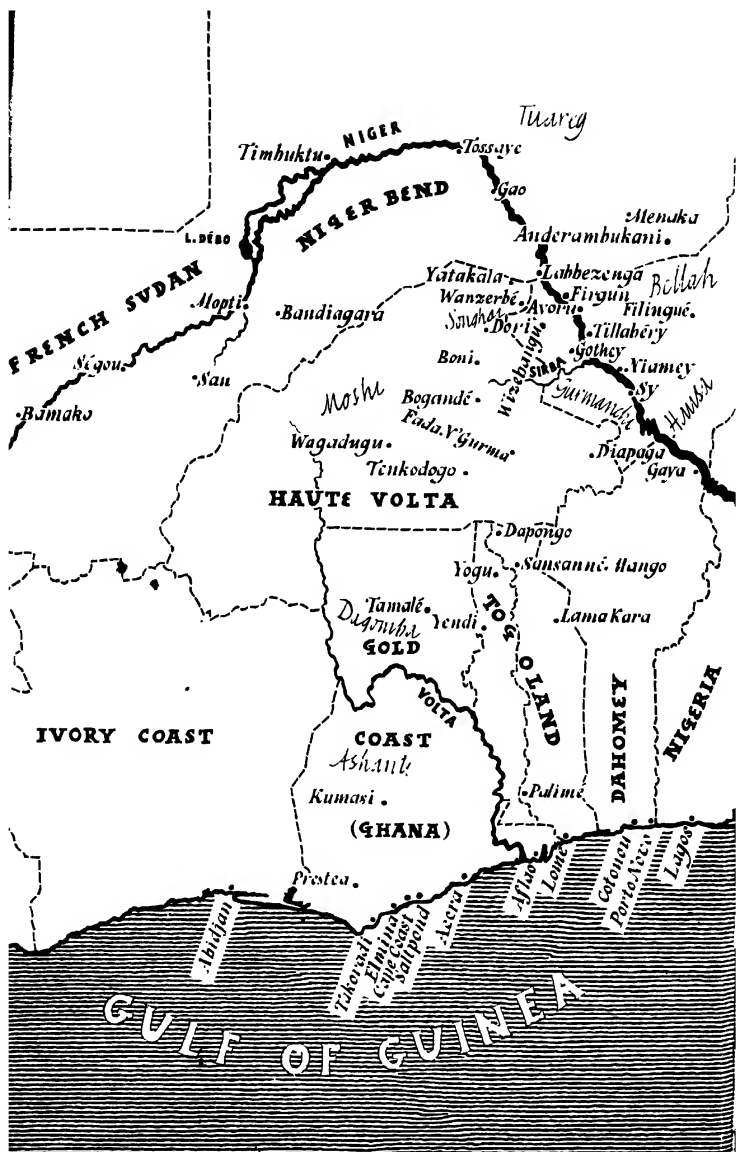
River Giant

ROGER CUREL

Two Frenchmen, Luc and Hermann, and Issufu, the son of an African chief, are united in a strange quest : to seek out and destroy a great hippopotamus, with a broken harpoon in his nose relic of an earlier encounter with Hermann.

Their search takes them deep into the heart of Central Africa and its customs. Ritual dances must be danced, strange spirits invoked, fetishes observed, magic men consulted before the final bloody battle can take place.

Roger Curel has written a magnificently exciting tale which subtly evokes the savage charm of the ever mysterious continent.

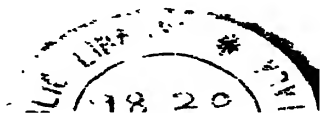


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One

LUC could not sleep. A war-time boyhood, during which he had lost both his parents, had left him rootless and insecure, with a craving for travel and adventure, which at present it seemed unlikely he would be able to satisfy. All that summer he had found life in Paris too placid, intolerably humdrum. It went on in a strange calm, which made you feel you were being carried along on the crest of a wave, and you could not help wondering about the shore where you would eventually land. But if you wondered too much about such things, it was perhaps the start of unhappiness, of sleepless nights.

He sat in his room building houses of cards, while his mind constructed castles in Spain. But though the card-houses remained standing, a wind of despair and bitterness blew in, as it did every night, to destroy the castles, telling him they had no sort of base in reality. The long succession of sleepless nights could not be mastered by building houses of cards and castles in Spain, not when you had romantic longings for journeys into the unknown, for the prospect of doing great deeds in distant lands.

Luc threw the cards down on the table, then left his room. It was the middle of the night, and the asphalt outside was gleaming in the rain. He walked up to Montparnasse and went into a bar. The little man came over to him at once.

He didn't know the little man well, though he had sometimes seen him in the library. They had got talking, and the little man's eyes gleamed when Luc told him: 'I want to travel, to see the world—I'm only waiting for a chance.'

And he answered Luc: 'Those who really want to see the world will always get their chance.' They had lunch together occasionally, but Luc still knew nothing at all about his life, except that he had fought in the war and seemed to live in the past.

Tonight the little man took him by the arm, and brought Luc over to his table. 'Let me introduce my friend Hermann, who's just leaving for Africa.'

The man called Hermann shook hands with him warmly. Hermann had powerful hands with prominent veins, a bull-neck, and gave an impression of serene but reserved strength. He did not talk much, merely smiled now and then as the little man said to him: 'Remember?' But that night Luc poured out his heart in complete confidence, because he felt such security in Hermann's presence that he was no longer shy of expressing his longings for journeys into the unknown, for those great deeds in distant lands.

'I have only just met you,' Hermann said, 'but I always take risks when I see a man I can trust. Would you like to come to Africa with me?'

'To Africa . . . with you . . . yes!' Luc answered, almost without thinking. You only had to look at Hermann's shining eyes and lazy smile to know this man could ask people for their lives and none of them would be able to refuse.

'Why?' asked the little man. 'Do you need a witness for what you have to do?'

Hermann turned a pair of green eyes on him, as if sizing him up, but did not answer. Instead he said to Luc: 'It's an old account I have to settle—with a hippopotamus. A long time ago this hippo killed one of my fishermen, and now I must kill the hippo to wipe out the shame of the defeat. It's a rule of the hunt, a rule I am bound to follow. I shall not know any peace until that hippo is dead. Today the Africans are expecting me for the last battle. It's in the heart of Africa, on the greatest of all the rivers I have ever seen; the

old giant is there, always on his own, yet protecting his herd. He has a harpoon blade in his nose, and when it hurts him, he attacks the canoes.'

Hermann paused, and when next he spoke, his voice was harsh and vehement, as he pictured the old giant of the great river.

'I have to kill him. I am the man who hurled the only harpoon which has ever hit him. He smashed my canoe, and killed Idrissa, my fisherman. That was years ago, but now I must go back there.' Calming down, he looked again at Luc. 'The fishermen will be going off on the hunt. Their chief, Umaru, has a son called Issufu, who was coming of age at the time of Idrissa's death. He had just been circumcised, so his father is convinced the hippo belongs by right to Issufu: but I and other fishermen are sure the old giant is for me. Now I can wait no longer. I and not Issufu must kill the old giant, no man may hurl his harpoon before I do. If you can come, I shall be glad to take you. I shall only ask you one thing, but I will ask it you out there.'

He gave a sad smile. He had deliberately ignored Luc's acceptance, wishing to see him think it over and ask questions. Luc realised this, but had accepted everything already, so why hesitate further? He said again: 'Yes, I'll come with you.'

Hermann took his arm. 'You have just pledged me your help. Remember that—but I shall remind you of it out there. No one else will know, except you and me and the old giant himself.'

'When do we leave?' Luc asked.

'Tomorrow evening—nine o'clock at the Gare de Lyons. We'll have to waste a day at Marseilles. After that I've a friend coming down the coast who'll take us on his ship, and we'll go as far as Dakar. Have you a gun?'

'Yes, a twelve-bore.'

'Bring it with you, and take some solid shot.'

'Do you hunt hippos with a gun?'

Hermann guffawed. 'We don't. But I want you to take it all the same.' He was still laughing when he said, 'See you tomorrow night then.'

When Luc woke in the morning, a great wave of happiness engulfed him. The morning was full of sunshine, and at noon he would see the woman he loved, to tell her of their long parting. He would make these farewells a splendid unforgettable moment, a knife-blade resting on the water, something eternal and shining. He would be leaving her to satisfy his restless soul's unsatisfied cravings, and afterwards he would return, strong as the sea, to carry her off and keep her all his life.

* * *

Hélène had somehow been prepared for his going away, had even accepted it. With the early maturity of those who grew up during the war, she sensed that Luc was not yet completely a man, and that the fertilising magic of adventure would bring him to manhood more quickly; yet the suddenness of the decision shattered her. The ageless feminine instinct, building everything to endure, rebelled against the disappearance of a happiness already gained, of that material presence which as the days passed would seem no more real than the stuff of her girlhood dreams. She thought Luc knew all this, and was amazed to discover, from the depths of her new loneliness, the desire for suffering which shone in his eyes. Through all her emotion she dimly guessed that it was the end of her adolescence, the first real sorrow, the birth of a finer Hélène who had learnt that happiness has its price.

For Luc too the parting was hard. It was far from being the splendid minute he had envisaged that morning. Instead, he held a woman in his arms, soft, warm and in tears, a beautiful and desirable woman whom he could possess there and then. He knew he shouldn't have thought of this, but he did think of it, and now the thing was done. Nor could he ever redeem that last

look from the girl who was no longer a girl—for she had become a woman.

* * *

At Marseilles Luc found a calm, efficient Hermann, who had everything in hand. They went to a seedy-looking hotel where the manager received them with deference. Obviously, Hermann was well-known there, but in front of Luc at least he seemed indifferent to their reception. Luc, in fact, was staggered by his idea of 'wasting a day' at Marseilles. They hadn't been five minutes in the hotel before he left again without a word, not returning till the evening. After dinner he took Luc to see the tramp they were sailing on, and remarked: 'We've got a truck at Dakar, but the rainy season has started, so the roads will be impassable. We'll have to go as far as Bamako by train.'

It was a clear July night, and as they walked along the quayside, an incident occurred which Luc never forgot. In the distance he noticed a brunette, seductive and smiling. When they came up to her, she softly called to them. Black-haired and slender, in a rather common short skirt, she still looked a good-class girl. Luc had turned to say 'good evening' and to decline her offers, when he heard Hermann walk past behind him, to come up right in front of the girl and give her two slaps on the face. As she held up her hands in dismay he began heaping the vilest insults on her in a low, hoarse voice. Then he returned to Luc, and they went off together in silence.

The scene shocked and disgusted Luc so much that he could not bring himself to mention it. But one day on the ship Hermann made a kind of apology, though rather a casual one. It was two days after they had sailed, off the coast of Algeria, and what he said was: 'Those girls are all the same; they make us waste our time.'

He was obsessed by the idea of time. Shut up all day in his cabin, he would come out of it immediately the ship's rhythm altered, and go down to the engine-room to question

an African stoker, who called him 'Mr. Ramana'. He always asked the same thing: 'Why has the ship slowed down?' The stoker would look up at the little skylight, wipe his smooth brow with a greasy old red cloth knotted round his neck, and answer, 'Oh well, we're coming along, Mr. Ramana. You know, I can smell the air of our country already.'

As for the captain, he knew Hermann all too well. At Algiers he told him: 'We're staying three days.' So when the boat left again on the second day, Hermann was beaming.

'You see, I know Hermann,' the captain explained to Luc in the saloon. 'If I'm a day behind schedule, he's capable of going down to the engines and getting up more steam.'

At Casablanca they stayed four days, and Hermann was seething though he did not express his feelings openly. Luc realised it by the sudden violence with which he closed a door, the way he shouted an order to the little Indo-Chinese cabin-boy, or stretched his massive body when climbing out of his bunk, and then went pacing up and down the deck tight-jawed, not blinking an eye-lid.

One morning the explosion came. Luc was standing on the port side with the boatswain and a taciturn sailor, learning how to splice a big mooring-wire. Bare-chested, in his blue canvas trousers, he was sitting on a heap of gear, trying hard to avoid the scratches which so often accompany wire-work, when the boatswain looked first at the sea, then at the funnel, and said, 'We're altering course'.

'Why?' asked Luc. 'Have we gone off it?'

'Oh no. We're a little further south than Port-Etienne, we're on the Arguin Bank.'

'What's the Arguin Bank?'

'The meeting-place of all the fish, and therefore of all the fishermen too, especially the Spaniards and Bretons. It's pretty tough for them, sometimes they stay weeks and weeks, it depends on the fishing. They have to bring their own water and food because there isn't any at Port-Etienne:

water is brought from the shore in a tanker, it smells awful, and tastes worse—I've tried it.'

They saw Hermann go down to the engine-room. The sailor got up and looked round. 'A trawler,' he announced. 'That's why we're changing course. The old man will heave to, and then comes the basket-work.'

'What on earth is basket-work?'

The two men smiled. 'It's an old tradition,' the boatswain explained. 'Barter by basket. The men have no more wine or fresh food, but they've too many fish. So we heave to, while the trawler comes to windward of us and sends off a boat. Greetings are exchanged, we lower a basket full of vegetables and a small barrel of wine; they empty the basket and fill it with fish. We take it up again, say good-bye, and everyone's happy.'

'Besides,' said the sailor, 'it makes a holiday. Work stops, and the men come on deck. They're pleased to see some new company.'

Hermann came up from the engine-room. He saw the trawler, and heard a sailor shouting: 'Spaniards!' Without a word he returned to his cabin.

The ship stopped with a great swirl of green, blue and white foam astern. Like the long shivers which horses sometimes give, it went on trembling softly on its idling engines. The wind and the spray from the open sea had ceased. The sun beat down fiercely on the men's jerseys, so they erected a tarpaulin up forward to give a little shade. Meanwhile the others, leaning over the rail, signalled friendly greetings to the men on the boat, who were hauling away, two on each line, in a jerky movement that now carried them over the crests of caressing little waves.

When the boat was quite near, you could make out the men, brown-skinned, bearded and smiling beneath their straw hats, with shirts hanging down over patched trousers rolled up to their calves.

A sailor began snapping his fingers and singing:

'The girls of Barcelona,
Ay! mariconas, ay! mariconas.
The girls of Barcelona,
Ay! mariconas, ay! mariconas.'

When he stopped, the men above and the men below started laughing and shouting like children. Then the Spaniards cried 'Hurrah!' and the sailors 'Olé!' The captain and mate, leaning over the bridge, kept their hands at the salute. The captain was just coming down the iron companionway when Hermann emerged from his cabin.

'Captain, you've deliberately wasted two hours' fuel-oil. I shall report it to the company.'

'You can report anything you like, Hermann. But just for the moment leave me alone—this isn't your business. You'd never understand an old tradition of the sea.'

'You've no right to make me lose time.'

'I'll take that right on myself if it's going to give pleasure to two crews.'

'I won't let you, captain.'

All the men were watching the scene. Luc was between the sailors and Hermann. 'That's enough, Hermann,' he said.

'I didn't ask your opinion, Luc.' Hermann turned his head and scowled at the men surrounding him, then retreated a little till he was leaning against the door of his cabin. Fists clenched, poised on his bare feet, he stood crouched, like an animal ready to spring. A look of despair and wretchedness came into his eyes, he opened his hands, and his shoulders sagged a little. 'Yes, you're all against me.'

The captain was returning to the bridge. This is becoming ridiculous, thought Luc. Hermann's face was drawn. Luc took him by the arm and led him towards the stern. 'You're a fool, you know. You ought to have waited till you were alone with the captain before you said anything.'

'I'll go and apologise . . . he's a good friend . . . I didn't mean to . . . '

'You'd better look out—since the voyage began, you haven't been your normal self, that's obvious. You work yourself up over nothing, and you'll end by getting everybody against you.'

'I'm not afraid of anyone.'

'That's pride, Hermann.'

'Yes, it's pride.'

'You should learn humility.'

'Listen, Luc. When you're sure of a thing and not idly hoping, when you take the moment as it comes, for pain or pleasure, then you're by yourself, as much alone as in the hour of death. Is that what you call pride? That's the solitude I accept, since I know with every fibre of my being that it's there and that we can do nothing to get rid of it. You deny it if you try to share your destiny with others, or pray for such sharing so as to make it sound more solemn, and then call it humility. No, I'm not enough of a coward to wear that mask.'

'All right,' said Luc. 'You simply want to achieve a victory or a glorious death. You don't really care which, it's the same thing for you. You know you've only brought *me* along to be a witness of all that happens, a witness pure and simple. And *I* know you'll manage things in such a way that the fight between you and the giant hippo will be a fight to the death.'

Luc had grown excited, and Hermann looked at him thoughtfully, realising he had underestimated his young companion. Yes, he decided, Luc wants to know everything before the proper time, but that doesn't matter: he's a man, and I can count on him. This upsets some of my plans, but perhaps I'd rather have his friendship than what I was expecting. It's a new situation, that's all.

'We're a team now, Luc, and all that silly business is over. Come into my cabin. We must talk.'

Hermann talked all night.

He told of the green islands of the archipelago, where the

river is so wide you can never see the other bank; of the herds of wart-hogs ringed by water, of lions that swim all night to kill a cow, of evenings round the fire with the Africans, the music of gourd-drums and fiddles, the canoes gliding over the water along the reeds, gliding quietly in the darkness so as to avoid the great herd of hippos which can be heard ploughing through the mud; and the boats are like armed men moving silently forward on a moonlit night after landing on a foreign shore.

He did not tell of the secret seed which he knew he was watering in Luc's heart, a seed that may grow to consume a whole life, just because one evening a man talks of distant river-banks, of power and pride and independence.

Nor did he tell how that seed, when it begins to live, can only live alone, rejecting all ties; how woman is banished from it; how when you have it in your blood, what other men call every-day life means merely death to you. Luc's flesh, bones and heart would learn later in suffering that in any case he had staked his all right from the first day. That was something Hermann could not tell him, yet it was already too late. They were past words, and the blood, in its eternal quest for sacrifice, had rediscovered its chosen vessel.

* * *

'Nice to be young and do what you like,' said the captain, when they landed at Dakar. 'I have to go down the Coast to load timber. I'll pick up deck-hands in Guinea and go on to Takoradi. In case you come to the Coast . . .'

'We shan't be coming to the Coast—nothing for us to do there.'

'Who knows, Hermann? Our roads have been crossing for quite a while now.'

'Perhaps, captain, if it's God's will. But I think today's crossing of roads is the last. I'm very sorry, of course—you've always been extremely good to me.'

'You know how much I am indebted to you.'

They shook hands. As Luc and Hermann walked out through the docks, followed by Africans carrying their cases, Luc asked: 'You did him a good turn?'

'Yes, a long time ago. But that's all past, and we must get back to the present because here are the Customs. We mustn't declare the guns.'

'Isn't that risking a fine?'

'I know what I'm doing, Luc.'

They came through the Customs without trouble, but the police check was harder. In Africa the black man is free to travel, but not so the European. Hermann stunned everyone by the number of papers he had. Luc and he were apparently off to build up a business exporting dried fish from the Niger to the coast. He gave the truck's number, his banker's reference, a reference from the governor's office—and everything was settled.

'Two duly authorised business-men,' said Luc with a smile as they left.

'That's the last you'll hear of it,' said Hermann. 'On the Niger we'll be hunters. I enjoy laying a false trail, it's their job to sort things out.'

At the hotel they were received with the same deference as at Marseilles. It was cleaner than the Marseilles hotel, and there was a mosquito net over each bed.

Hermann chatted with the manager, and seemed less reserved. He told Luc: 'We broke stones together during the war. It was the camp at Podor where some of us Gaullistes were interned. They nearly had us then all right.'

'But we were a tough lot there,' the manager put in, slapping his chest.

Hermann left him with Luc, saying: 'Meet you here this evening, Luc. I'll have the truck, equipment and cash.'

Hermann had insisted all the expenses must be his, so Luc was dependent on him; but that remained a secret between the two of them.

Luc went for a stroll in the damp heat of the early

afternoon, along streets where black boys stood around polishing shoes, selling loose cigarettes and kola-nuts. There was a steady flow of busy-looking men in shorts, each with a white topee on his head and a brief-case under his arm. Except for the Africans it was a town like any other, perhaps a bit dirtier. Luc was delighted by his discovery of the black man's grin. They were observing him with an amused disdain that was yet void of malice. 'Another green European,' said a boy at his side. Luc smiled, and everyone exploded with laughter.

'They're not the real Africans,' Hermann told him in the evening. 'You'll be seeing the men of the bush, men who hunt lions with bow and arrow, and the harpooners of the river. They are Africans who haven't got to choose between two worlds. All that's our fault, of course. We destroy their civilisation, and what do we bring them in return? Nothing. Things to do but nothing to think. For them we're simply power, the power of guns, power that destroys. "Captain, you can burn villages"—that's how they flatter us. There's the only sort of praise we've brought to their lips.'

♦ 'Aren't you going a bit fast? After all we give them medical treatment.'

'We keep them alive, just like in Europe, with one foot in the grave. Wait a bit, Luc. I can see you've come with your little creed well rehearsed. White civilisation is the better, we're more intelligent, we have machines and the rest. Only remember—there are never any suicides among the Africans. You know what that means? Nobody claims a power above God to decide when his life should stop. Nor does anyone consider himself so feeble that he can't carry his burden till the end.'

'Take it easy, Hermann, I don't necessarily think we're the better, I'm merely asking questions. If I'd had all the answers, I shouldn't have come out here in the first place.'

'You'll go on asking them, Luc, right till the last day; and you'll never have the last word. If there's a secret, and

there must be, then I shall know it at the end of all this, and so will you. But perhaps it will only answer a single question, so think hard what you want to ask.'

Hermann had lowered his voice, and said the last words almost under his breath. Luc looked at him. His eyes were closed, his chin raised, his nostrils contracted. There was a tiny fragment of his spirit he longed to pass on and perpetuate through Luc's spirit.

* * *

Above the town they stopped in front of a villa covered in wistaria, while bougainvillaea's thick greenery trailed along the fence, pink, red and mauve blossoms almost merging into each other. A flamboyant slowly went out in the evening, its flowers dead till the next morning. Hermann pushed open the gate, and there stood a sturdy little truck with a new tarpaulin. In the dusk it gave the same impression of massiveness and quiet strength as Hermann himself: both sons of danger, spiky, independent and aloof.

'An ex-army Dodge with winch, four-wheel drive, new engine, low-pressure tyres with two spares, a couple of tin trunks, a box of tools, cooking things, a table, two chairs. Luc, it's all here. Out you come, Keita.'

A black form appeared from under the tarpaulin.

'Nobody's been here.'

'There you are, Keita. Thanks very much.'

Pocketing the note, the man went airily off. Luc sat down at the wheel. 'Hm, masses of gears—where's first? Ah, I see. Sidelights, headlights, choke, starter. A bit stiff, but that will pass. Now for reverse.'

He pressed down the clutch, revved up the engine, and for a moment savoured the sound of its vibrations. Then he pushed in the choke, the noise became regular, and the sword-dance was transformed to a dull purr. He leant back against the seat, and tried the hand-brake, then pressed the foot-brake two or three times to get the fluid up. Now Hermann was sitting beside him.

'This must be celebrated. We'll have our last European evening for a long while. No, stay where you are, I'll direct you.'

* * *

The casino overlooked the sea. They threaded their way through the couples on the floor, buffeted by mournful music and glaring lights. Beyond the white evening clothes and bare shoulders, cold stares and tight hands, they could hear the sea and smell its heavy, pungent tang, different from the smell of any other they had known. A miserable, domesticated sea, driving its heavy foamless waves on to the grey and sticky sand. Yet the fetid water of this little lagoon was fed from the hardy rocks and bright waters of the Mediterranean, the roaring whirlpool of the Pillars of Hercules, the power and majesty of the open sea with its ageless waves. Perhaps it was like that with man's spirit and the acts which expressed it. If all the power of an idea could trail off into this feeble, sordid end, then no suffering was worth enduring, or rather, action itself was perhaps a contemptible and fortuitous excrescence, like the insidious fungus which grows at the feet of great oaks. But defeat or triumph mattered little, thought Hermann; you only had to believe in the greatness of the idea, and you would reach port.

The dance had finished. One of the band was shaking a saxophone. The rest put away their instruments and went off towards the bar, only a drummer staying in his place. The cabaret began. A slim hard-looking Austrian, with an affected smile and effeminate mouth, ended his turn by waltzing with a cadaverous blonde in black lace; after which an acrobat came on to the floor. His girl assistant began heaping chairs on a table.

'She's like Hélène.'

'Hélène who?'

'Hélène . . .' Luc blushed. 'Er—she's my fiancée.'

'Ah, I see. Don't think of her too much. We're likely

to be a long time out here, and she might forget you.'

Luc was incensed. 'If you don't mind, Hermann, I'd rather you didn't meddle in that.'

'Oh, of course not.' He glanced at Luc sardonically. 'Marriage and children, eh?'

'Certainly.'

'Good Keep your dream. A dream is needed, true enough. And if you build it up carefully every day, you'll end up by believing it.'

'Is that your business?'

Hermann smiled again, then said gravely: 'I wasn't trying to pull your leg, Luc. It's a fine dream, only not for us. We'll talk about it again some time.'

'We won't.'

'All right, we won't then. But one day I think you'll be the one to start talking.' He waved his arms in the direction of the hall. 'There's your colony in all its ten-o'clock splendour. What a life! A day in the office, aperitif at the club, dinner-party, and an evening at the casino. A bathe at Yoff every Sunday, with a canoe to watch out for sharks. They never attack, but who cares? Every now and then a great expedition, driving out to meet friends at the airfield. Then they go back to France and say: "Oh, Africa's terrible, my dear, just too bush, you know".'

Both men laughed, and Hermann went on: 'They're very kind, of course. When you go into the interior, they do all they can to help you, a bit like the Red Cross ladies on the railway stations in 1939. It's the system that's bad. And the children—you should see the poor kids when they get on the boat, pale, thin and yellow. They gradually begin to come to life again with the air of the open sea, and by Marseilles they've got colour in their cheeks and bright eyes. No, it's the system that's bad.'

Luc returned his eyes to the acrobat's girl assistant. What would H  l  ne be doing at this time? She'd be at home, reading. He remembered the softness of her warm skin, her

way of snuggling close to him with that far-away yet trusting look in her eyes, asking nothing else but his presence; that world of mutual possession which used once to seem as fragile as a spring flower, and today seemed ageless as the earth. That daily conquest, so fleeting and unsatisfying, at the mercy of a word, a forgotten minute, was transformed today into an enduring certainty. How long all these days would be! But when he returned—He could see his return like a great coloured lantern-slide in which they gazed at each other without moving, full of desire, yet restrained, not speaking or touching each other, but gazing into each other's eyes and knowing they were united for ever.

* * *

Next day the adventure began.

Energetic and thorough, Hermann showed no further sign of his tempers and doubts and questionings. In any case there were too many material details which had to be settled, leaving him no time for extraneous thoughts. He and Luc were obliged to load the Dodge themselves on to a goods truck, and attach it to the Bamako train, which in two days would bring them to French Sudan, a thousand miles from Dakar. In those parts it was the only way of ensuring the vehicle's safe arrival. They stuck on the goods-truck all the 'priority' labels they could find, then settled contentedly in their bunks to smoke cigarettes and drink beer. Hermann had got into a pair of old leather shorts and an open-sided sleeveless tunic, hanging down a bit like a sandwich-man's boards.

The train stopped at every station for complicated man-œuvres, though they always ended on the same single track, for that was all there was. In the evening of the first day the goods-truck with the Dodge had disappeared.

'In God's hands,' said Hermann, falling into the central philosophy of the Africans. 'We'll have several days to wait for it at Bamako.' He carefully stowed his watch away in a case, and explained to Luc: 'Time's finished now, there



are no longer any hours. Only days, but you don't count those. Might just as well get rid of that fragile and cumbersome little object.'

'But there *are* Africans who wear watches.'

'Yes, but not to tell the time. It's no more than an ornament.'

In the restaurant-car the waiter pointed out to them an important-looking individual with white hair, tortoise-shell spectacles and a double-breasted blue suit.

'A *député*?'

'If you like,' Hermann said. 'Anyone elected to anything here is called a *député*. Look at his plate—he orders special dishes and leaves half of them. He's more or less obliged to, for the sake of the African waiters. In Africa the only way of demonstrating your wealth and power is by waste; economic life is built on that. You'll see me do it with gifts. One has to give without counting, toss notes in the air, and always spontaneously. If you look as though you are calculating, you lose the moral benefit of the gift.'

'Even in the bush?'

'Specially in the bush, and it works both ways. If I'd kept all the sheep and goats I'd been given, I'd have the biggest flock in the Niger and the Sudan. It's a habit to acquire, and soon becomes quite a pleasant one. That way there are no poor. Everyone is certain of his food, and this is a country where you don't need a roof over your head.'

'Shall we have boys too?'

'Three of them. And not so much boys as friends to whom I give presents. They've been with me before, and I've let them know I'm coming, so they'll be waiting for us at Niamey. Yes, I've known them ten years. You'll have no sort of trouble with them. They were with me at the first battle with the hippo, and one of them is a harpooner himself.'

June that year was a terrible month. The railway track disappeared under water; for miles and miles it looked more

like a river. The train dawdled and jerked over the partially submerged sleepers. Here and there overturned railway waggons were lying.

'Were they derailed?' asked Luc.

'No. But as there are no sidings for hundreds of miles, and they were blocking other trains' movements, they got pushed out of the way. In the dry season they'll be put back on the line.'

'And the Dodge?'

'The only danger is that it'll be forgotten in a station, but that's pretty unlikely. And then there are our "Priority" labels; they'll think it's for the governor!' Hermann laughed happily.

* * *

They reached Bamako in torrential rain. Hermann became anxious. 'When the water rises too high,' he explained, 'government stops all vehicles so that the tracks don't get totally submerged, and there are road-blocks they call "rain-barriers" all along the flooded areas, guarded by African police. So we'll try our luck going north, it should be easier.'

The truck arrived a week later, but the seven days had made a lot of difference, for the causeway over the Niger was now impracticable. The great river was now a swirl of muddy waters, which would go on rising for two months. Hermann was almost swept away when he went to have a look. They lost a day waiting for the ferry, and after that had to drive along flooded roads.

The truck was indeed like Hermann: spirited in dry country, and no less powerful in the mud. After the 'corrugated iron' surface of the road to Ségou, a pipe in the hydraulic brake system was broken by a sudden jolt; but two miles farther on they saw a gang of navvies belonging to the Public Works Department. 'Our luck's holding,' cried Hermann jubilantly. 'They'll put things right for us here.'

A pimply European smelling of wine received them effusively, then put down his whip and started tackling the

job himself. Later he insisted they should stay to dinner, and extracted huge chunks of red meat from a kerosene refrigerator, giving them to his boy with much routine abuse. His guests heard all about his unhappy youth, his adventurous life, his battles and his love affairs. They heard parts twice over, in fact, for he embellished them with the appropriate actions.

'Antoine, old man, I told myself, you've just about had it —because snakes bite, you know. Not a bit, I answer, talking to myself, what? Not a bit, just keep calm, and whoosh, I've caught it in my fingers.'

He mimed the combat while Luc and Hermann were dropping with sleep. The truck eventually repaired, they left the next day, although it was hard enough for them to get away: the Public Works engineer had taken a fancy to his public.

'Surely you'll stay a few days, won't you? We'll go hunting—some nice little black girls. Anyhow I'm going to close the rain-barrier.'

He did close the barrier, and it took a long palaver, with Hermann at his calmest and most diplomatic, before this fond friend allowed them to go off again.

'You've just seen one of the Public Works specimens,' Hermann commented, when they were on their way. 'They're Africa's real tough nuts. Always on their own with great gangs of Africans, keeping the roads in repair. The Europeans of the bush can be divided into three classes. First the district officers, the only people who really know the country; you can always count on them if you're honest. Then the Public Works types—you meet them where no one else goes. They don't ask you for anything, and you're always welcome; they have plenty of time and equipment to get you out of difficulties. They're a collection with some pretty odd characters, I must say, but you won't meet worse than our friend back there. And finally you have the merchants. There it's a real gamble: you get sharks,

twisters and quite charming people, sometimes all three at once. You need to be on your guard with them. Be suspicious without looking it, and watch them. If you make a mistake, you'll pay for it. But of course you only learn about men by making mistakes.'

* * *

Before reaching Mopti, they had bad news from a returning lorry-driver: south of Bandiagara, the road crossing the great Niger bend to Dori was definitely cut, and the bridges swept away. His plans thrown out, Hermann decided they must retrace their steps, making for San, which was a day's journey. When they got to San, they found bare-breasted girls, wearing only a small cloth, selling peanut butter, mangoes and kola-nuts. A cycle-repairer was changing an inner tube, while men near him sold check blankets and dried fish. Youths in gaudy woollen berets presided at stalls with lozenges, vaseline, Sloan's liniment, English knives and torches.

The storm had stopped, and little white clouds were drifting off to the south.

'That's where I come from,' a driver told them, pointing to the youths in berets. 'I'm from Gao, like them.'

He had apparently been a week at San already, doing repairs to his old Ford three-tonner. He had managed to take the crankshaft out, and was working on a main bearing. He had hammered a steel stake into the sand, and was tapping a ring on this to shape it.

'He may still be here in a month,' said Hermann, 'but he'll get away some time. An African driver can stay broken down for months, but he always gets away in the end.'

They invited the man from Gao to eat with them. He belonged to the Songhai tribe, and it was in his part of the country Hermann would be fighting the father of the hippos. They asked him to tell them about his journey to the Gold Coast, which the Songhais called Kurmi; if you had been to Kurmi, you were a 'Kurmiza'.

'Ah, my friends, Kurmi is a great country. I sold all my fish at Kumasi.'

'Dried or smoked?'

'Dried—it was fish from Mopti. They smoke it farther south, and that makes it more expensive. I sold all my fish for five times the price I paid for it. There are too many people out there, because there's too much work. Lots of Frenchmen. Bellahs go there now they're no longer slaves. Lots of Songhais and lots of Moshi.'

Hermann explained to Luc that the Bellahs were former slaves, now freed, of another tribe, the Tuaregs, while the Moshi were a tribe inhabiting the centre of French West Africa.

'Yes,' the man from Gao went on, 'the Bellahs are the dirtiest, the Songhais are the smartest—they all have a good magic charm; and the stupidest are the Moshi.' He chuckled. 'They never stop working.'

'And all of them make money quickly?' asked Luc.

'The ones working in the gold-mines who are lucky enough to get a nugget out. The ones with a strong juju for stealing without getting caught—and then the rest who work and aren't too stupid. Listen, I know a man who used to sell firewood on donkeys, at Gothey in the bush. At Accra, after only two years, he could afford a big car and a driver. He can't write, but you'll see him all day with his fountain-pen and leather brief-case, and there are two or three hundred Songhais cutting logs just for him. The Ashanti are too rich, they drink and don't like work. So except for the people from my country, who else can work in the mines, on the cocoa farms and timber concessions? Who else can keep Kurmi going for those lazy blighters?'

'Do the people of Gao still start fights at the market in Kumasi?' asked Hermann. 'And does their chief still sell sheep there?'

'You know Kumasi?' cried the Songhai in amazement.

'Yes, I'm Kurmiza.'

The man could no longer restrain his enthusiasm. 'Ah, Kurmiza . . . Kurmiza,' he repeated, shaking Hermann's hand and laughing delightedly.

'Yes,' Hermann told Luc afterwards, 'the Gao people have quite a reputation in Kumasi; they're always getting into scraps in the market. I know their chief very well, he's a fine chap. A few years ago I went to sell cattle in the Gold Coast with some Songhais from the Niger bend. We took a smuggler's track, and the first time I got caught. At the frontier I had to sell my cattle to one of the Hausa tribe coming from Kumasi. I'd taken all the risks and made nothing out of it.'

'Are cattle important down there?'

'They can't keep them: too many tsetse-flies, the climate, no pasturage. So meat fetches a very good price on the Coast. Anyhow, the second time I took my herd to Kumasi, I sold it for seven times what I'd paid. I'd had a lot of trouble, but that made it worth it. What a country the Gold Coast is! It used to be hard to get there; the Africans had no lorries to take them. Today they all go. The Bellahs, who don't want to work for their old masters, the Tuaregs, the Moshi from Wagadugu and the Volta, the Songhais from the river and the bush, from Niamey to Gao, if they're young and have a thousand francs for the journey—they go there too. It's a sort of initiation with the Songhais: when you come back from the Gold Coast, you're a man.'

'When I hear them talk,' said Luc, 'specially that driver, I feel as if the Gold Coast were almost a myth, like the Golden Fleece.'

'It means adventure for them, in this country where we've suppressed and practically banned hunting and fishing. When the children of the bush have harvested their millet and the grain-stores are full, they need something bigger to look forward to. There's nothing else left to lift their hearts except the thirst for travel with its daily ardours and trials.'

'It's an unknown country for me,' said Luc, 'and I don't know its men. But from the little I have so far discovered, I think they and I are on the same road and have much the same goal.'

'It may be the same for you perhaps,' Hermann answered, 'But I have to go farther.'

Yes, Hermann was breaking new ground, but what was the distant light that he alone could see right in the heart of the bush? What dead men's souls danced ahead of him, lighting up the night to show him the track?

* * *

From San they went down into the Moshi country, to Wagadugu. They heard lions roar, and saw great antelopes, heads erect, leaping far into the green savannah before disappearing behind baobab trees. They saw lepers and people with sleeping-sickness. They had so many storms and fasts and wakeful nights to endure that it brought a sense of detachment from the body and its cares. They learnt to scorn the body and to master it when it rebelled; or rather, Luc learnt this, while for Hermann it was his lost strength returning: their spirit sharpened and hardened, they had stripped away the inessentials, knowing that deep in the bush the old giant of the great river was ready for battle.

In case their patience needed a test, they had it at Fada N'Gurma. The rain-barrier did not open for them, and they had to stay over a fortnight in a cold, gloomy, bat-infested rest-house. They used the time to check over the truck, and change the oils. Everything had stood up to the journey well. Hermann put a 'helper-leaf'¹ on to the springs, welded a protective grill in front of the radiator, and made a solid wooden shield round the petrol tank.

They spent the fortnight with a missionary they had found at a ford and given a lift to. This wretched-looking man, dirty and yellow in his threadbare robe, had only a

¹ Small extra leaf used to help the springs' dampening effect.

single blanket and no bed. He was going back to the bush in the Atakora mountain range. He believed in his mission with a simple faith, despite the little success it seemed to achieve.

'I'm very fond of the Africans, but you really can't do much with them. I've been seventeen years in West Africa, I've been in the north and on the coast; we haven't been there three centuries for nothing, although there are still Africans who think the Cross is a good protection to have. I've known thieves at Cotonu who would receive Communion and have their Cross blessed before every expedition. When I realised it, I threw them out, but they didn't see why! There are some successes, and lasting ones too, but what a lot of humbugs. Don't talk about the north. You can just about get the idea of a single God across, but how can you expect them to understand Our Lord's teachings on right and wrong? At first I burnt their idols, so they thought that was what I liked doing, and humoured me by making special idols and bringing them along for me to burn. No, I've got my own ideas about Christian morality here. It's too spiritual for them, Islam will take root more easily. There are things you can get hold of in that, physical disciplines, magic, good food, women, and above all a warrior prophet on horse-back with his sabre. Still, I love this country, and God willing, I hope my bones will be buried here.' He added with a laugh: 'Have to look out even there, because they're quite likely to use them. So remember, if you see a chief with a fine necklace, that it might be my vertebral column.'

At last they reached Niamey. Luc had his eyes closed, for a thought had taken hold of him, leaving him feverish with excitement: he was going to read Hélène's letters. All of a sudden he felt like diving into the water and swimming quickly to the other bank.

There was scarcely a ripple on the great river, but beneath the surface you could guess at the terrifying power of these waters, born at Tembiko in a small pool, dallying

in the Debo Lake, then bursting mightily from the desert sands as far as Timbuktu, swirling through the Tosaye Gorge, foaming over the rocks at the Labbazenga rapids, to flow in front of them here as the final witness of their now irrevocable plans.

The lights of Niamey twinkled on the other bank. The night sky was flecked with flights of herons. A young shepherd-boy passed quickly by behind his goats, absorbed in his task. The river of rivers flowed strongly down in mid-stream, but allowed the noise of its smooth waters to die away in the reeds.

Hermann walked into that calm water as if it were a mountain lake; at the place where the current began he stopped, yelling and gesticulating.

'Turn on the headlights. Three long, three short. Three long, three short. Same thing for the horn—yes, horn first.'

An hour later the ferryman was there on his motor-ferry.

'Ramana. Praise God! Ramana'—he was almost weeping—'it was your signal, but I couldn't believe it. Praise God! And you're here.'

'Why does he call you Ramana?' Luc asked.

'They can't pronounce Hermann, it's too hard for their ear, so they say Ramana. That's my name everywhere here. They won't find "Luc" easy to get their tongue round, so tomorrow you'll be changing your name, too.'

'All your boys are waiting for you, Ramana. They've been there a long time. Adamu arrived a month ago. Lamido has been waiting for you more days than I can count, and Duma came in a canoe from Ayoru. They're all here, your boys—ah, Ramana. . . .'

'Nothing new at Niamey?'

'All is old, Ramana. Some have gone away. Some have come too, but all is old.'

'And the great river?'

'Ah, the great river wears me out . . . ' The old man began to laugh.

Two

THE three Africans were waiting. When the truck stopped, they came forward.

'Evening, sah.'

'Evening, boys. Hullo there, Adamu, Lamido, Duma!'

No further words were needed. Hands were shaken and all eyes shone with joy. They were Ramana's three sons in the eyes of the world. In their eyes too, and in Ramana's. He was their father, and they would be his to the end. From now on he alone would take thought for their lives, and all would depend on him. So many months had passed since he went away, but time counted no longer, for now Ramana had come back with heart unchanged. All creatures had their own way to go, the way of the red ant or the way of the big dog—the lion. All men had their own blood, a white man's or a black man's; yet now that blood was as one, for the children had found their father again, and he would show them the way. When he raised his stick to guide them, their feet would fall in his tracks. When he spoke, they were bound by his words. When he showed his strength, it was their strength.

'So we're starting out again, sah.'

'First we have to talk and do some business, but tomorrow we start. Meet Mr. Luc here, he is like a brother to me!'

'Evening, sah—what was your name?'

'Luc'.

'It is a hard name. Lussu sounds better.'

They shook hands with him. Since Ramana had said so, he was to be treated the same as Ramana.

'And that's our truck.'

'Ah,' said Lamido, 'I'm learning to drive. That's good, isn't it! This truck is better than the last, it's a lorry for travellers, not for fat pigs—like our Duma.'

Everyone laughed at this sally.

'Well, boys, what has been happening to you all this time?'

They all looked at Adamu. He took precedence even over Lamido, usually known as Lam, who was also of noble race and descended from a great family; the name Lamido meant 'chief' in the language of the Fulani, the pastoral tribe to which he belonged. But Adamu was a Sorko (the highest Songhai caste, the caste of fishermen) so here in Songhai country it was for him to speak first of the three. He had the Songhai's delicate features, wore a beret, a long blue *bubu* (or sleeveless shirt) and white shoes. He sat down with legs folded beneath him, and took off his beret. Then he scratched his head, spat, and began his story:

'Mine is a long, long story. When you left, I gave up my father's work. Fishing doesn't pay you today if you haven't a permit. I gave up my harpoon and took to the pen instead. A good friend called Suley got me into the Health Department. The doctor was a big chap with spectacles who shouted all the time. He sent me east into the Hausa country, to Maradi, Tahua, and then Tessua. The first day I read a newspaper written in Hausa. It came from Nigeria, and was called: *The truth costs two francs*. Well, the truth almost cost me ten strokes with a stick. A policeman made trouble because I was reading this paper. "It's forbidden," he told me, and took me to his chief. His chief wanted to scare me, but when he saw I was an official like himself, he said: "All right, we'll let you off this time." Still, it was a narrow escape.

'After that there was a terrible epidemic of meningitis. The whole Medical Department was vaccinated immediately, and the orderlies went off, some on camels, others on

mules or horses. They went north, south, east and west, taking boxes of vaccine and needles, but for a long time a truck was needed to go round keeping them in supplies, they used up such a lot. One day the doctor said to me: "Adamu, I need orderlies—so I want you to give up the pen. I'll show you how to vaccinate, then you can go round the villages doing vaccinations because now there are too many people dying." I said I would go, and left my two wives weeping, also my dog who was just going to have puppies. I went off with my boxes and two mules. I had two escort-police with me as well to frighten the villagers, who were running away and not wanting to be vaccinated. In the first village all the young men and girls were dancing. They do nothing but dance in that country when the harvest is over. The chief had me brought some chickens and said: "All of us have been vaccinated already, so please take a good rest, with plenty of food—ask for anything you like. Then you can leave again whenever you want." I said nothing, but thought: you wait, my friend. I sent out my two escort-policemen, summoning the village to a meeting. At the meeting I asked the chief: "You've been vaccinated?" "Yes" he said. "Show me your arm," I told him, and looked at his arm—no vaccination. Then I vaccinated him, and when he'd been done, he said: "you can do the whole village, no one's been vaccinated." He laughed at that, but he didn't laugh very long. I was still learning then, and couldn't do it very well, so he had an abscess come up as big as a baby's head, and had to go to Tessua for treatment. I had the last laugh there.

'At the second village, near the Nigerian frontier, there was no one there. The policemen said: "They're in England." So we hid in the bush and stayed there two days, and the villagers came back. I sent the policemen to one end of the village with their guns, and then I arrived. They went crazy. I told them it wasn't to annoy them but to stop them dying. They didn't have anything to say after that, and we

stayed in that village nearly six days—lots of dancing and good food. Altogether I was seven months in the Hausa country, with trouble all the time trying to get my job done. The Hausas are the best farmers, but they're too fond of dancing. That's why there aren't any virgins in their country, but the girls settle down well enough when they're married. But the Hausas are such liars!—lying is the only thing that counts there. Oh, I was very tired at the end. I had fever, and I finished the round with a camel stupider even than one of my policemen. The fool danced along so fast the boxes fell off. Yes, that was some journey!

'And afterwards?' Hermann asked.

'Afterwards I got your letter, and I came. That was a tiring journey too. I came with my two wives, both pregnant. When we arrived, I took them to their parents, one to Gala, one to Niamey. Since then,' Adamu concluded, 'the days have passed, and I have been waiting.'

'And you, Lamido?' said Hermann, turning to the modest little Fulani.

'Me?' said Lam. 'I stayed a long time at Gaya after you'd gone. With the money I bought a fine English cycle with three bells and went off selling kola-nuts in the bush markets. Being so small I often had to push it. Then one day my father sent me to an old *marabout*¹ at the Koran school, and my brother kept the cycle. This old *marabout*, who was almost blind, asked my father if he could take me with him to carry the prayer-mat. Oh, he was half dead, that old man, and he was too fond of green tea. Anyhow, we left together for British Nigeria. We went up a great river, and stayed a long time among the fishermen. Afterwards we were at Kano—that and Ibadan are the two biggest towns. I could talk my own language there; we found Fulani everywhere. When we went South we stayed more days than you can count in the Nupi country and among the Yorubas in the mighty forests. There was no more meat or

¹ Mohammedan monk.

tea or money; the villagers refused to give us any more. So the old man began coughing. I couldn't sleep. He coughed so much that he died. Then I could sleep all right, but afterwards the people there threw stones at me and told me to get out, so I left those wicked Christians and went to Ibadan. What a market! Full of animals! I saw a Fulani who knew my father, he told me my father was dead. I was all by myself for months and months trying to get home. I was frightened. I went through the forests carrying an earthenware pot with glowing charcoal, which I threw at the snakes, for there were heaps of snakes. I went up trees, to see if I could see anyone, but I never did, so I walked on. Once there were two tall men, though, terribly tall, who followed me with sabres. I hid, and let them go by. Oh, I was frightened, I can tell you, being so small. At that time I didn't know Hausa, nor any other language. So when I began to hear people talking Fulani, I got new courage in my heart, and walked all day. The people didn't say anything to me then. Higher up, in the north, I crossed a great marsh and reached Gaya. My brother gave me back the cycle. I must have been away about a year. I went to the bush markets again. I could mount the cycle now without putting both feet on the pedals first. I learnt plenty of Hausa, and when I had a little money, I sold my cycle and bought some cattle. With five men from my family, we got a herd and went down to Ibadan. It took a long time, and we lost a cow, but we made money, lots of money. When I came back, I bought more cattle and there you are,' he concluded. 'Now I've been waiting for you.'

'Your're not married, Lam?'

Lam lowered his eyes like a shy girl and muttered almost inaudibly: 'I'm engaged.'

'The Fulani are all liars.' said Adamu.

'Yes' said Lam, 'but at least they don't try to make themselves out bigger than they are.'

'Oh, that was well said, Lam,' exclaimed Duma.

'Well, now we'll hear this fat slave tell us his stories of food and girls,' said Adamu, laughing a little too loudly.

'Duma is the slave of the chief of Ayoru, the district Firgun belongs to,' Hermann explained to Luc. 'Well-informed people say there are no longer any slaves in Africa, but where would Duma go if the chief didn't give him anything to eat?'

'Yes, that's true. Mamadu Yakuba is a great chief. I'm a slave and have many girl friends. And I have a nice full belly at Ayoru.'

Duma was a muscular youth, strong as a bull, with a large flat nose. He tapped his stomach and rolled his eyes.

'And your story?' Hermann asked.

'Me?'

'Yes.'

'There isn't any story.'

'No story? What have you done since I went away then?'

'Oh, I see. Well I grew millet in Mamadu's fields with a friend, a young Bellah called Talu—he's very lazy and very nice. He stayed at Ayoru for injections because he was ill. It's the doctor who said he was ill, he wasn't really. Afterwards I went to work on the rice-field, and there the herd of hippos broke the dam with their big feet. The district officer gave Mamadu a gun, and one evening off we went. We hid, Mamadu looked along the gun, and there were the hippos on the dam just by us. Then Mamadu's foot trembled, and boom! He had a bad chin for two days. As for the hippos, it was as if a little fly were stinging them, they only shook themselves. I'm always talking to the fishermen. Umaru talks of you, and so does Illo, and Suley. Issufu, Umaru's son, has gone to Kurmi . . .'

'What!' cried Hermann. 'He's in the Gold Coast?'

'Yes, sah. It's only just now that he's gone, on an English truck. Abdulai was with him.'

'That's a blow, Luc, I thought things were going too well. Umaru won't want to organise anything when Issufu isn't

there. We must go and see what's happening at Firgun. Well, boys—we start tomorrow morning. Here, at five o'clock. Good-bye now. Don't forget my harpoons, Adamu.'

* * *

Luc held Hélène's letters in his hands. His cheerfulness began to give place to fear—at the dangerous game he was starting. Tonight, in a sort of dream, he could see distorting mirrors between himself and Hélène, which could produce any illusions desired. Almost before the thought had come to the surface, he hurled it back savagely into the abyss of the unconscious; yet this very rejection created an image in his mind. The two mirrors were opposite each other, and they both went on reflecting Hélène and himself, like a black candle and its flame. But suddenly the candle went out, or else was parted from its flame. He saw Hélène stealing away, with a queer uncertain look on her face, and he was left between the mirrors, desperately alone, waiting for the onset of unbearable pain.

'Hélène!'

The cry woke Hermann. He sat up on his camp bed, raised the mosquito net, and slipped over to Luc. 'You asleep, Luc? What's the matter? Are you ill?'

'Oh, it's horrible.'

'What's horrible?'

'Nothing, a nightmare. I can't get back to sleep.'

There was a buzzing insect caught inside Luc's mosquito net. He switched on his torch, having lost all desire for sleep. He saw the insect in the torch's beam, motionless on the white sheet. He could have dazzled it, taken it in his fingers and set it free—but all that was too much effort, the nightmare had exhausted him. He was an insect himself, trapped in his own thoughts.

So near she seems, and so far. Here am I, on a camp bed somewhere in Africa, while Hélène, fresh from her bath, lies in clean white sheets, filled with the warm smell of her. I ought never to have slept with her, he told himself; it was

mere pride that made me want to brand her, as it were—leave a mark I could believe was visible. As if I'd wanted to make sure of the future, taking pledges between us that would call for a forfeit in blood if either of us broke them.

But no, that's all nonsense, argued another part of him—I never had such crazy ideas in my head. I've known Héléne a long time, she could have been mine any day I wanted; she was only waiting for me to ask her. She told me it was natural, that whether we did it before or after we got married made no difference; she seemed to find the question so unimportant. I thought I was holding a woman in my arms, and today it's a girl who's writing to me, with all the fear I've brought up in the pit of her stomach, a lonely girl lost on an ocean whose storms I can't control, with the letters I write to her as her only raft.

I may be lying to you now when I write, Héléne, but you must believe that the lies come from a heart which is true to you, a heart trying to stop time at that one enduring moment. It is a moment which can overcome death and decay, and whenever you recall it, Héléne, you will know it was a timeless moment, containing neither lies nor truth, but created by God because it had been within me from the beginning of everything. . . . Why am I talking to you as if you were dead? You have never been so much alive. Always the same, yet ever changing, like the waters of the sea. I find you again, the same as that first Héléne who waited for a boat to return to harbour one summer evening. . . .

It was a port in Brittany, and the boat had gone out with the fishermen and two passengers. One was Luc himself, and he remembered the sad individual who had shot down cormorants without bothering to collect his bag, simply settling an old score with these birds. At his side was Mme Groix, watching him ceaselessly all through the trip. He remained aloof from the fishermen's delight when they hauled in the net, out in the mist far beyond the islands: over three hundred pounds of perch. To celebrate the catch, they

drank red wine, which Mme Groix at first refused; but when Luc accepted, she changed her mind. They reached the quay in mist and drizzle, and as he jumped off the boat, there was the girl. Mme Groix smiled and took his arm: 'May I introduce my daughter?' Hélène was in a blue skirt, pale and shivering despite her fishermen's jersey, and told her mother: 'I'm frozen, I've been waiting for ages, let's go back at once.' And Mme Groix insisted he should come and have an aperitif at the hotel with them, 'to warm us all up.'

That was how things started. By sheer chance. The chance of a village chosen at random to pass a week; an address scribbled on a scrap of paper and found again, by chance or mischance, one winter Saturday in Paris, when it was cold outside and he hadn't any plans for Sunday; and that Sunday which was followed by other Sundays, which might be followed by a whole life-time of Sundays.

It was snowing outside, he could see the flakes through the window. Behind this ceaseless snow, a black cloud came from a chimney to fight a lone battle with the snow-storm. The quiet fall of the flakes, interspersed every now and then by metallic vibration from the carriages of the overhead railway, stopped him listening to Mme Groix. He registered her voice as a continuous noise, monotonous as a purr, and behind it an echo of complete trivialities. Her universe was like a big cat's. The subtle indolence, the selfish disdain for anything not involving herself, was mingled with a smugness often expressed in loud laughter; but her laughter failed to convince him that there could be any possible resemblance between Mme Groix and her daughter.

The first time he saw Hélène alone, it was again a snowy day. She had arrived pale with cold and said: 'Let's have some tea, I feel done in.' Afterwards he took her to the cinema.

As they went back to where he lived, he thought: I love her—but with so much fear that he got no pleasure from it.

It was all transformed into a painful obsession. He had never believed that Hélène would hear him out to the end, when he began clumsily explaining how he felt. Even today, he could not forget her answer: 'Luc, never leave me, I can't live without you.' She began to weep, great sad tears. She was alone and in distress; it was only he who could keep her alive by the strength of his wrist, by his words and his breath, by his eyes and his strength, keep her above the surface of that bottomless lake into which she would one day sink if his embrace relaxed. He saw the lake's waters, frozen, green and dark, the muddy banks asleep under a load of moss. If all his strength were one day to grow feeble, the girl with the tangled hair and closed eyes would have to depart into the depths of an unknown realm; other blind and long haired girls would take her into their circle there to tread out the measure of their dreams all together, never unknitting their cold fingers in the mist and the silence.

* * *

He was woken by a burst of laughter. Lam, squatting in front of a heap of embers, was bringing a shapeless black object out of an oven made up of two flat stones placed on top of each other.

'Oh, it isn't baker's bread yet. Overbaked and no yeast. But we're getting on all the same. Ramana likes bread, so I learnt to make it. If we find some English yeast I'll soon do better, it'll blow up as big as the dome of a mosque. Today it's like a small canoe, except that it wouldn't float. Still Lussu might like to try this little bush-cake.'

'Let's have some,' said Luc, sitting down at the folding table, while Duma tried to open the deck-chair. 'Not so hard, Duma. Lift the back first, and then pull.'

'Take care of the equipment, you son of an ox. You'll smash everything, and Ramana will have to sit on your back till the end of the expedition.'

It was Adamu arriving, clad in a sumptuous blue *bubu*, his travelling box on his head.

'Ah!' sighed Duma ecstatically. 'Always something new with Ramana—the lamp that goes "boom" and the umbrella that turns in the wind.'

Hermann and the three boys began laughing at the memory of Duma's adventures with the previous equipment. Then Hermann looked at Adamu, and asked: 'You're going to travel in fine clothes like that?'

'Oh no—it was simply for my arrival. Now it'll be shorts and beret, and afterwards, for the hunt, Sorko dress and the harpoon. A real fisherman must show his wealth, you know.'

'And his vanity,' Lam whispered to Duma.

'This little *marabout* talks like the Koran,' cried Duma, who could never resist talking loud when he ought to have kept quiet.

'Here, take my box and put it in the truck,' said Adamu, dropping it in front of him.

'And there you are,' said Hermann, sitting down opposite Luc. 'They're all three paid the same wage, and in the testing time you'll find they're united as brothers. But Duma, who is a slave's son, knows that Adamu is high-born and that Lam is a bit of a *marabout* and descended from a chief; so he obeys them without a word. Except that Adamu commands, while cunning little Lam suggests. If you hear Duma complain, you can be sure it's really Lam who's put him up to it.'

The truck was throbbing rhythmically as the engine warmed up, they were all settled now and ready to go. Then Adamu came out with a prophecy:

'Today the sons of the bush return to the bush, and the men of the river to the great river. It is a journey where there will be blood, courage and fear. Those who sing praises will sing till they can sing no more, putting courage in men's hearts, where they will sorely need it. We are starting out for weeks, and we shall stay for months. There will be a spell on the water, and we shall have to pay dearly to free it from the spell. Some will not obey the gods, and

they will be struck down. Much evil will come from a man who carries three sheaves of millet on his head and does not look when he is greeted. Divisions will break out, and the right path will be lost for a very long time. Some stomachs will know hunger, and others will be too full. There will be much weeping and gnashing of teeth, much dancing and music, thief-men and friends, great cold and great heat, but we shall come well out of it all, because last night there was a dance of the men possessed by spirits, and these spirit-horses said that the god of thunder is with Ramana.'

The truck moved slowly off through the ruts.

'Ah yes, that's true,' said Lam, 'they danced all night. But many of the spirits are against us.'

'Certainly,' admitted Adamu, 'but with Dongo, the great god of thunder, we shall be the stronger.'

'And I must look out for birds,' said Duma, 'birds are going to make me ill.'

'That's true too,' said Lam, 'but it's not the vulture.'

Hermann turned towards the young man. 'No, it can't be the vulture. A man from Wanzerbi will come with us if necessary. He has been summoned and will protect us. Wanzerbi,' he added for Luc's benefit, 'is a village where great magicians live. They are brothers of the vulture, and the man there who is going to help us will prepare all the magic charms needed for our success.'

'Hurrah!' shouted Duma. 'If the white man listens to the people of Wanzerbi, we are sure to win through.'

The truck gathered speed, and soon they were in the bush. Above the laterite track, worn away by rain, the sky was vast and cloudless; on each side was an infinity of thorn-bushes: grim and desolate savannah, oppressive with loneliness, where the soul was left dependent on its own resources.

Hermann braked, and pulled up. 'Pass me the gun, Luc.' Taking it, he let go of the steering wheel, and aimed at

something Luc could not see. On the other side of Luc sat Adamu, tense and silent, ready to leap out. Hermann fired, then quietly reloaded and fired again. By now Duma was racing off.

'The knife,' cried Lam, dashing after him. A hundred yards away Luc saw a cloud of feathers, with Duma in the middle of the cloud, thrashing about him.

'May God send us a good meal,' said Adamu solemnly.

'God, and this good eye of mine,' Hermann commented, lighting a cigarette. 'We'll stop outside Gothey and cook them.'

'Two,' said Adamu. 'One for Duma's bottomless belly and the other for the rest of us.'

The birds bleeding over Duma's shoulders were two huge ducks as big as large bustards. Lam wiped his knife, exclaiming: 'A good gun, dyam!'—it was the first time Luc heard this Songhai oath.

'A little noise, and the pot is full. I'd like to stop for an hour to roast them; and after that it'll be the festival of the bellies, eh, Duma?'

'Big as lambs and so much cheaper!' exclaimed Duma.

They stopped near Gothey. While Lam was lighting the fire, peasants from the village came to see them.

'A great misfortune,' said the oldest to Adamu; he did not dare address the Europeans. 'My horse has sunk up to his neck.' He rubbed his neck slowly, not knowing what to expect from the strangers.

'Wait a little longer,' said Adamu. 'He may turn into a wart-hog and you'll be able to eat him. Pig is good with gravy, so I'm told.'

The insult was quite gratuitous, designed simply to show the peasant he was talking to a noble.

'Here, white man,' cried the outraged peasant, 'listen to the way your boys insult me when I lose all my fortune.'

'Take me to see your stupid horse,' said Hermann. 'Perhaps we'll try to get him out with the winch of this truck.'

They stopped in front of a gathering of people. There were some thorn-bushes about thirty yards away, from which a horse's head was protruding. Hermann went over to it. 'Quick-sands, eh? How was your horse hobbled?'

'By the two front hooves,' its owner replied. 'He was trotting quietly, and then the child over there ran up and told me. Your horse is drowning in the sand. We all ran up, and we've been pulling now for three hours, but he's sinking farther and farther.'

'Right. Well, now half of the men must cut branches and bring millet straw in big sheaves, while the rest dig under the horse's belly. We'll pass the cable under his belly, put the branches and straw there; and I'll pull. If your horse is solid enough, he'll come out. If not, he'll be cut in two and he'll stay there. Do you agree?'

'Yes, of course. Who wouldn't agree when there'll soon be nothing left in view but his eye!'

Half the village was there. It was certainly the first time they had seen a truck coming to extricate a bogged horse.

'I need butter,' said Lam, realising that a fair charge could be made for such a spectacle. 'And some good smart boys to bring me wood.'

The village chief began yelling, sending off a dozen small boys on various commissions. The wind whistled round their bare bottoms, as they scattered into the bushes, trotting on their thin legs, laughing uproariously.

'They go faster than guinea-fowl,' said Duma. 'All the boys are having a good laugh to see the old man losing his horse.'

The work began amidst a grand chorus of encouraging cries. Once the hole was dug, the sand had to be pressed back with the straw, the straw plaited round the cable, and the cable pulled from the other side before it was attached. A man succeeded in putting a mattress of straw and some branches under the animal's belly. Luc began taking up the cable while Hermann directed operations.

'Phht!!' said Adamu. 'This idiot of a horse, who tried to gallop through the bush, farts loudly when he comes out of his hole. His way of saying thank-you I suppose. And here comes the old peasant now, to say thank-you in *his* way, with hens—or eggs if he's poor!'

The horse was breathing laboriously. The last shove had taken its breath away. It lay on its side while all the men admired the winch. 'What power! said one. 'The power of the white man! The power of machines and the power of guns! Oh, you who burn villages. . . .'

'Hey, no *griotage*,'¹ said Adamu. 'I suppose you think now we've got your horse out we'll start throwing notes in the air.'

'Yes,' Hermann added, 'The Gothey *griots* should reserve their powers for singing of great exploits when the time for great exploits has come.'

'Ah,' said the *griot*, 'I started singing too soon. This white man has his pockets sewn up with fisherman's thread.' Then he saw the scars on Adamu's face, by which everyone could recognise the Sorko fisherman.

'Yes, fisherman's thread,' said Adamu. 'And at the end of the thread there's a harpoon, which even you with your great greedy fish's mouth couldn't swallow.'

The *griot* departed in discomfiture, Lam announcing complacently: 'First victory in the war of the *griots*. And our first good meal too—I'm ready now.'

The peasant appeared with two hens. 'They're very small, but they didn't run away!'

'Oh, of course not,' answered Adamu. 'Here it's only horses who run away. Anyhow, you're happy, and so is the white man. The war to free the horse is finished. Good-bye.'

During the meal Hermann explained to Luc what *griots* and *griotage* meant in black Africa.

'The *griot* is master of the word, spoken or sung. Words

¹ *Griots* are a mixture of bard, family historian and magician; see Hermann's explanation below.

here are binding on those who utter them, they keep their magic power. This *griot* you saw just now wanted to sing my praises so as to get money, and we stopped him—which is always difficult, since a *griot* can talk for hours; so he tried to “spoil” my reputation by suggesting I was a “poor white” without money, a mean, avaricious character badly advised by Adamu, my counsellor. That’s the stuff of petty *griotage*. These men are professional *griots*. They are feared and despised, only interested in money, and if you don’t give them enough, they can put a very bad reputation on you from hundreds of miles away in the bush. Don’t forget that in the Songhai country generosity is the most important of qualities. The idea of *griotage* dominates the African’s whole spiritual life: a priest of the religion of the possessed souls will become *griot* to the gods by singing their chants. The magicians will be *griots* of the invisible powers they ask help from; and a man who hunts with the bow will be *griot* of the poison in his arrow and of the lion he is going to kill. During the great hippo-hunt the first harpooner will stand alone on his canoe, ready to hurl his harpoon, and in the hour of battle, you will see him listening to the *griot* who sings the chants of his ancestors, so as to “make his heart stand up”—to give him the courage needed for attacking the hippo. You will see men sitting miserably near bush fires of an evening, who cry like children when their ancestors’ exploits are celebrated, and on the next day they have become fearless fighters once more. In the depths of your being you will feel something almost beyond our modern imagination: the need to hear your own praises sung in this way before you can fully believe in yourself.’

Adamu, Lam and Duma looked at the white man in silence. They sensed that he was again truly their father, as he had been before, that he would lead them to victory, and that the old, shameful defeat would be wiped out with blood.

Lam was the first to speak: “The old giant of the great

river, who killed Idrissa, knows you now, Ramana. You will have to change your name to go on the hunt.'

It was advice he had wanted to give Hermann for years, but a wealth of shyness had to be overcome before the little Fulani could speak out on such an intimate matter.

'That's certain,' said Adamu. 'Dongo must be asked.'

'A wise word it must be when the Sorko fisherman and the little *marabout* agree,' said Duma.

'Yes, boys, we'll ask Dongo, and this time I'll listen to everything Dongo may order.'

'Wisdom and victory,' said Adamu.

'No power without a wise head,' said Lam.

Then they were all shaken by a jolt. Duma began laughing, and stretched out on the Dodge's floor-boards. 'This truck is very tiring, so I'm lying down and going to sleep.'

'Do we stay at Tilaberi tonight?' asked Luc.

'No,' said Hermann. 'Tonight we must be at Ayoru to pay our respects to Mamadu, because he's Duma's master, and I want him to lend me Duma. Besides, it's Duma's village, and our young bull here is sure to have some presents for the girls in his compound.'

'Yes,' said Duma with a seraphic smile, 'the girls of Ayoru are so lovely . . . and tomorrow is market-day.'

'The girls of Ayoru are so lovely . . . hey, Duma, that wasn't what you were saying at Niamey.'

'Who's going to remember today what I said in that town where everything's for sale, even the water in the river?'

'Our Duma's a good lad,' said Lam, 'but as soon as he sees a girl, he can't keep a thing, not even a five-franc note.'

'Yes, but that way I don't need to be afraid of robbers.'

'And then there's my little business to keep you in kola-nuts,' said Lam.

'Your little business? Are you starting up as a travelling merchant?' Luc asked with a smile.

'Oh, nothing much. A few calabashes of kola-nuts I've

put in the truck. It's worth much more in the north, but young fat-belly Duma eats all my profit.'

'There's a real friend, the sort I like,' said Duma. 'With this little *marabout* you have kola-nuts all the time, and anything that's left Ramana buys for presents at the local price.'

'Bad deal for me.' said Hermann. 'The farther into the bush we go, the more Lam charges me.'

'Oh yes, that's business,' said Lam. 'Only don't forget, Ramana, that the farther north we go, the hotter it gets, so the kola-nuts dry up in the truck and I make a big loss.'

'Who can argue about money with a Fulani?' said Luc.

'Aha!' exclaimed Adamu. 'The new white man is beginning to get to know us!'

Three

THEY reached Ayoru in the middle of the night. The rest-house keeper, Balobo, began weeping with joy when he saw Hermann.

'I knew it, I knew it. I've been expecting you for days and days. The Sorkos of Firgun spoke of you. Their harpoons have been ready for a long time now.'

'And yet, old papa, you who know all the news know that Issufu has left for Kurmi.'

'Yes, I do know. But if you wish to talk of this, you must talk with the people of Firgun. Issufu has gone because he wants to marry, and if he did not go, what woman would marry this boy who could not call himself a man yet, even though he is a Sorko fisherman?'

'Ah, Balobo, I am worried to think of Issufu in Kurmi. It's lucky I have come now, or the hunt would not start this season.'

'The hunt will start when Dongo wishes, Dongo the great spirit of thunder.'

'Of course, Balobo. Now go and tell Mamadu Yakuba that his friends the white men are here and can hardly wait to see him again.'

The rest-house was a sort of mud-built cathedral, seasonally devastated by the great tornadoes and rising from its own ashes a few weeks afterwards. Out of the mud and straw of the battered walls other walls were born, only to be battered down again for the same future rebirth—so long as there were men who sought to impose their power against the gods of heaven.

At present a large block of clay had collapsed, and the

Europeans' room looked directly on the river which came lapping over the fine sand to within a few yards. Facing them was a light from the small island of Ayoru Gungu.

'Ayoru of the Isle,' explained Hermann. 'That light shining is the house of Ayissata, the great singer of the Niger, who runs all Ayoru's prostitutes. She is from a large Sorko family, and four of her brothers come hunting with us. There is a very beautiful girl living on the island, Adiza, her niece; and I would lay heavy odds that it is her Issufu wants to marry.'

'Why are you so certain about this marriage?' Luc asked.

'I'm sure it's one that has been arranged long ago. Issufu is the youngest of the Sorko fishermen, Adiza is a Sorko herself, and I can't think of such a good match for Issufu anywhere else, unless a passion for some slave girl makes him forget he's a Sorko. But in that case Umaru would be angry and not wait for Issufu but go on the hunt without him. Indirectly, in fact, this girl may hold in her hands the fate of the whole hunt. I'll go and see her tomorrow, and if it's as I think, I'll try to settle the thing with Ayissata's help.'

'You really need *her* help?'

'Of course. She has the last word on marriages in these parts. They all do what Ayissata decides.'

It had been a tiring day. Adamu and Lam were already asleep, while Duma had gone back to his compound. Hermann and Luc were alone, the night was soft on their faces. In the hurricane lamp's shadowy light their camp-beds, beneath the pale mosquito nets, were like two catafalques. Bats hung down from the roof, breaking up the darkness with eerie black shapes. In the river, quite close to them, the two men could hear the swish of the catfish, the plop of the fierce tiger-fish diving back into the water; then, in the silence, the river's slow murmur and distant calls from a canoe. Far-off voices reached them, the sound

of footsteps in the sand, another call from the village, and the neighing of a horse.

'Listen, Luc, to the village that never sleeps, listen to the thousand voices in the calm of the night. It's for moments like this that I have returned. Yes, I know, there's the hunt; but that is simply a climax, and my love is for all these men in all their days and nights. When I was far away, I cried like a child, because I was home-sick for the bush. They are all my brothers, these children of the bush and the river. Everything is poor here, they have only what is essential; but a friend remains your friend till death. And now I am back in the bush at last. Yes, I was angry about Issufu when I heard he had left for the Gold Coast, but after all he left for adventure. We come to his home, and he goes off to Kurmi—to that fabulous country where all kinds of trials await him. Afterwards, when he returns from the Gold Coast, he'll be a man, he can marry—no, you can't blame him. He knew I was arriving, of course, and that may have been what made him leave. He knows there will be conflict between us two. He was only a boy before, and he knows my strength, so perhaps he was afraid and wanted to prove his own strength before facing me again.'

'We shall find out when he comes back.'

'Or even before. Umaru, his father, will tell me the truth if I ask him. But like all truth here it may take some time to extract.'

He smiled. The night was cool and he was at home. His spirit was unsullied, for though he had to kill, it was from necessity, to wipe out the shame. He would kill on the river in the sunlight or in the night of the green waters, but he would kill because he had to kill.

Hermann got up, and Luc followed him: Mamadu Yakuba was arriving. He came through the door with all his suite behind him, blew his nose with his fingers, and wiped them, then pressed Hermann to his heart.

'Why, Ramana, you are stronger than ever. Greetings and

greetings again. And what are they saying in the country of the white men?’

‘There is nothing new, Mamadu. They are merely saying that the best of riders can always do with new boots.’

Hermann handed him a pair of red boots. The chief was plainly delighted. After blowing his nose loudly once more, he sat down on the ground to try them on, amidst an admiring murmur from all his escort.

‘Ramana, they are wonderful. We have fine boots here, but never have I seen boots as fine and solid as these. And you in your bare feet, have any of you ever seen such boots?’

The murmurs swelled into ecstatic cries. Duma, who was among the escort, began yelling with joy.

‘Here, let us sleep!’ cried Adamu, displeased to see another chief in the same house as himself.

‘Good night to you then, and greetings to the new white man,’ said Mamadu, shaking hands with Luc. ‘Now go to sleep, for tomorrow is market-day, and you will be woken early by the men and the herds.’

* * *

In one burst dawn tore through the night. A sudden freshness at ground level proclaimed that the sun was about to rise through the bushes. Between the rest-house and the village there was an expanse of sand several hundred yards long, separating the river from the round clay huts with their roofs of pointed thatch; and in this space a sleeping world began to wake.

The young herdsmen who had walked most of the night, now dozing in their gaudy blankets wet with dew, opened a drowsy eye on their big cattle with the huge lyre-shaped horns, which rubbed against each other and lowed plaintively. The Hausa butchers started lighting their fires to prepare the cinders round which they would grill the meat. Bellah women in blue cloths suckled filthy babes with wide bewildered white eyes; while their men-folk, clad in tanned skins, arranged in heaps the wooden containers, hollowed

out by fire and decorated with the knife, which they would exchange for money, cloth or salt. As they had only just arrived, the asses and cattle they used as mounts were still accoutred with hides, water-skins and sticks.

Farther away, under a covering of thatch stretched over four posts, merchants up from the coast unpacked on to the sand all the marvels of the south: for the Songhai women they had cloths in garish patterns, mostly red and dark brown, such as for centuries the Dutch had brought back from Indonesia; while for the nomads they had rolls of cloth in dark indigo that felt and shone like silk, and blue cloths of coarse cotton—next to white turbans of the finest muslin, which would be worn by the priests and chiefs. To complete the temptations of these stalls, there were English torches, tins of ointment, bottles of liniment, yellow, blue and red beads, kola-nuts and bicycle parts.

It made a splendid babel of sound: the cattle lowing; the cries of the camels, which every so often, in sudden fits of pique, would run off slaving at the mouth; the rasp of knives as the men of the north divided up their salt into sparkling cubes; the howls of joy from the children when some traveller, back from the coast with a magnificent bicycle to dazzle his brethren, began sounding its bell triumphantly. All these noises rose over Ayoru with the rising of the sun.

The market would be in full swing till the middle of the afternoon, when the men would start back on the long march to their remote villages. For days and days they would speed through the thorn-bush along barely visible paths, where their insubstantial tracks would vanish at the first wind, leaving nothing behind to recall their gathering at Ayoru, nothing except the word. But the word would spread by evening fires in the bush, and the young men's hearts would be filled with fearful longing for this Ayoru-on-the-bank-of-the-river, this trade capital where their steps would lead them sooner or later, renewing their thirst for other

countries distant and unknown, for that fabulous Coast of Gold which some of them would see if God willed it and they had the strength.

* * *

Adamu came to find the white men.

'Ayissata is waiting for us on the Isle. She is happy to see you, Rumana. Balobo has the canoe ready, so if you and Lussu will come, the great river is waiting for us.'

Going to the front of the boat, Adamu stuck his pole into the reeds and pushed off from the bank. As soon as they were in mid-stream, he took the paddle, while Balobo steered from the back. It was only a short distance between Ayoru and Ayoru-of-the-Isle, behind which the Niger flowed on out of sight for miles and miles, with swift currents that died away in the reeds, till it reached the bush of the lion and the wart-hog, the antelope and the vulture. This was a vast area, bounded on three sides by the bend in the Niger curving round for nearly four hundred miles: mostly uninhabited bush, with rare little marshy pools, a hard mother to men and beasts. In the dry season lion and antelope, under stress of the same thirst, could be found drinking almost side by side. A little farther north, on the left or Gurma bank, the hippos lurked in the tall reeds, to be driven out of their cover when the time for the hunt came.

'The hippos have been bad this year,' said Balobo. 'They broke the rice-fields dam again, and smashed two canoes between Labbazenga and Firgun.'

'A long way that,' said Adamu.

'It was in the first reach before the rapids.'

'Were the canoes loaded?' Luc asked.

'No, only the farmers coming back from Gurma, and they weren't hurt, they could swim away. But they lost the canoes—smashed into little bits. One farmer saw a hippo come out of the water as big as two trucks, with a harpoon blade in his nose.'

Hermann went pale. 'Balobo,' he said, 'it's the old man of the river.'

'Yes, Ramana, it's the old man, the worst of them all.'

There was a silence on the canoe. In that moment the legend which had nourished them with its flame abruptly became flesh and blood. They only had to paddle to the south or the north for a few hours or a few days, and in the end the old giant who had haunted their hearts would come out before their boat, showing his huge head with the old mark fixed in his flesh for ever—so that the killer with the keen harpoon would know his victim or else his slayer. Beyond this one giant they were challenging the whole world of the hippos: these nameless waters would become a multiple body that suddenly took on the shape of a hippo whenever any of the herd felt like fighting them. The challenge began that very minute; from now on the old giant's violated realm might suddenly burst open in their midst, with the river's lapping transformed into a terrible cry as he tore through the watery veil that separated him from the light.

The canoe came into the bank. Hermann, Luc and Adamu climbed out and set off for Ayissata's hut.

A vast matron, beturbaned with red scarves, her eighteen stone draped in a gleaming red cloth, sat on a black wooden chair near the door of her hut. She held out her soft fat hand to the two white men.

'Well, Ramana, how have you come to the way?'

'For good.'

'How have you come to the bush?'

'In peace.'

'How have you come to the evening?'

'In health and peace.'

'Aha,' said Ayissata, 'so we come with full hands to see our mother.'

'Here,' said Hermann, laying in her lap three cloths from the coast.

Ayissata smiled. Through the fat you could still see she was a Songhai by her quick shrewd eyes, her fine features, and the scar she had under one eye. In a shrill yet attractive voice she began to talk of the harvests, then of the markets and her journeys.

'I've been on a tour of the Hausa country with my girls. We made a lot of money, and I sang every day, but how tiring it was! These Hausa folk are too fond of festivals.'

'That's true enough,' said Adamu. 'But you made more money than you do here.'

'Oh yes, the people here are very poor. If it weren't for the young people coming back from Kurmi, I think I should end up by singing for a measure of millet.'

'Those who come back from Kurmi always come with their pockets full,' said Hermann.

'Or else they say the thief-men have taken everything from them.' Ayissata laughed. 'But that's a secret of the Isle.'

'I'm told Issufu has gone out there,' remarked Hermann.

'Yes, that's true too,' said Ayissata, suddenly circumspect.

'He has good magic charms, since like all Sorkos he is a descendant of Dongo the thunder-god,' said Adamu. 'He's sure to return with a truck-load of gifts for the Firgun girls.'

'Or perhaps for an Ayoru girl, eh, Ayissata?' suggested Hermann.

She laughed loudly. 'Hoho, you're too clever for me, Ramana. Yes, it's a girl from Ayoru-of-the-Isle.'

Herman smiled himself. 'Might even be a relative of yours.'

'Perhaps Adiza-of-the-Isle is her name,' said Adamu, his eyes on the ground, tracing patterns in the sand with his finger.

'Adiza-of-the-Isle is her name, and she is my niece.'

'Then you can help us,' said Hermann. 'We're too good friends, Ayissata, for me to hide from you any longer the purpose of my visit. Issufu is on the Coast. Where is he working? He must return quickly for the hippo-hunt. I

want to start on this hunt, and you know that Umaru won't agree if his son is away.'

'I see what you want,' said Ayissata, 'but who can tell where a Songhai is working in Kurmi? They hide themselves well, they never say anything, and after months and months away they come back with money. No one ever knows how they have made this money, they all lie. Even their friends, those who have seen them work, will not say anything—so what can a woman like me do for her white friend?'

'Adiza could ask him to return quickly, you might urge him to go on the hunt with me, and the time of the marriage could be advanced. These are three things that may happen.'

'Perhaps, but if he comes back here too soon, he won't have made any money.'

'If I go and look for him, Ayissata, and if he returns with his pockets full, will you be content?'

'It will be very tiring trying to persuade everybody,' Ayissata observed in a weary voice. 'That will cost me many gifts.'

'If a cow is waiting in front of you at the end of the market, will that make you happy, Ayissata?'

'A single cow, Ramana! It will be sad all the time, it needs a friend. But two cows in my compound—ah, they will be smiling all the time!'

Adamu burst out laughing. 'Ha ha—we have lost! So now, you white men, bring out the purse. It's two cows we need to win Ayissata's consent.'

Ayissata rose from her chair. The matter was settled.

'Wait a minute, I'm going to talk to Adiza.'

She left with the three cloths under her arm, while the white men sat down by Adamu, who told them: 'There you are, you see, talking to Ayissata is expensive, but it succeeds. Even Umaru won't be able to undo things now. But listen, Ramana, if you're going to look for him in Kurmi, you'll have to ask all the children of the river, and what will you say? "Where is Issufu the harpooner, haven't you seen

Issufu, the young Sorko who has never worked? Oh yes, he's easy to recognise, he's black and wears a *bubu*. Come on boys, help look for him, a Sorko who's black in colour and as tall as me." Is that what you'll say?" He chuckled. 'You'll see. Finding Issufu in Kurmi will be as hard as finding a nugget of gold in a mountain.'

'You may laugh, Adamu,' said Luc, 'but if the young man stays months and months in the Gold Coast the season will be gone, and we shan't have the hunt this year.'

'I know,' said Adamu, 'it has to be done, but it's very hard.'

'It's very hard,' Hermann agreed, 'but all the Songhais know each other out there. If I send for Issufu and say the white men are waiting with a chest of money for him, Issufu will ride the wind to meet us.'

'Ah, money talks best,' said Adamu, 'but even so it's hard. Still, I and Lam and Duma—we none of us know Kurmi, and we shall enjoy the journey very much.'

'Wait until you're there,' Hermann told him. 'It rains all the time down there, you never see the sun through the big trees, and a sheep costs as much as a cow.'

'I know that too,' said Adamu, 'but they have the great market of Kumasi, the gold-mines and the cocoa; and out there cloths, bicycles and gramophones are cheap. Ah, you white men can say what you like to me, but I have been thinking of Kurmi since I was a boy.' He became dreamy. 'I've been told that the sea makes a noise like thunder down there, and that they have floating houses, bigger than the governor's palace at Niamey, which come to empty their wares on the bank every day.'

'Yes,' said Hermann, 'twelve hundred miles from here they have all that.'

'Twelve hundred miles!'

'Certainly. Weeks and weeks on difficult tracks.'

Adamu relapsed into his thoughts, and the white men too were silent. Then Ayissata returned with a girl.

'Adiza greets the white men.'

The girl kept her eyes lowered. Tall and slender, she was beautiful as the night. Luc gazed at her, struck by her great beauty. She raised her eyes and looked at all three of them.

'She agrees,' said Ayissata. 'Go back to your compound,' she told Adiza, giving her a gentle push.

Then Adiza smiled at Hermann. Her hair was piled high, she had a straight nose and small voluptuous lips. She wore earrings of beaten silver and bracelets of coloured beads on her arm.

'Here,' said Hermann abruptly, emptying a fistful of silver coins into her hands. 'Now you can make ankle bracelets for your wedding.'

She bowed her head, taking leave of them, then walked out: slim legs, calloused heels, and the erect gait of girls who carry water on their heads.

'Straight as a candle,' said Ayissata, using the oldest of Songhai compliments.

• 'Very black and very delicate,' Adamu conceded. 'She really is a beautiful girl—and very modest. So now our first talk is finished, Ayissata. The second will begin with Umaru.'

'I've sent a messenger,' said Hermann.

Ayissata looked at him. 'This I do for you, Ramana. You are my friend, and you are going to kill that hippo. I think Umaru will listen to you kindly.'

'Thank you, Ayissata, we shall come back to see you when all goes better.'

'All will go well. This white man who is with you is a good white man. Your three boys are good boys. So go in peace and health, and all of you come back to see me . . . but don't forget, Ramana, "Sudan Rose", that's the perfume I like. You'll find some at Kumasi.'

'Women and gifts, there are two things which always go together!' said Adamu under his breath.

Balobo brought them back to Ayoru for the end of the

market; they found that Duma and Lam had finished loading the Dodge. Hermann and Lam began cleaning its engine, while Duma, Adamu and Luc went off to buy the two cows. Just as Duma was leaving them under guard in Mamadu Yakuba's compound, Hermann appeared on the track at the wheel of the lorry.

'And now, boys, on our way for Firgun. Now we can face Umaru with our talk-harpoons well sharpened, eh?'

'After everyone had laughed at this, they drove off in a cloud of sand and red dust from Ayoru-on-the-bank-of-the-river.

* * *

'The millet is very high,' said Duma. 'Listen to the children shouting to chase the birds away.'

'We're quite close to Firgun, I can smell horses and smoke,' said Lam.

A last bend on the track bordered by millet fields, and Hermann stopped the truck beneath the only tree on the river-side. Opposite them, about two hundred yards away, floating on the Niger like a raft of dried mud, they saw a small island with round huts and palm trees dotted over its southern bank, and in its centre a steep tumulus, about seventy feet high, the only landmark for miles. A canoe had just left it, and was coming over to them. They got out of the truck. This was Firgun, the safe and happy isle, resting on its waters, full of fresh breezes and loyal friends.

'We're home, Luc,' Hermann could hardly conceal his emotion. 'This is the critical stage for us, and I believe that here everything will be cleared up. You'll soon be meeting Umaru, whom I count as my good friend, though it's so long since I saw him. You can be sure that if anything has been done against my plans, it was not done with malicious intention, but probably in obedience to the gods of the river.'

Luc was silent, and Hermann went on: 'Nothing is ever done here without a reason, you see. Perhaps one day

Umaru saw the rainbow or heard the roar of the thunder spirit. Seeing the signs and hearing the voice, he carried out what he believed to be a god's command; because if anything went wrong, he would be responsible. He is chief of the fishermen of Ayoru, Firgun and Kutugu; and chiefs may not make mistakes. When Idrissa was killed, he was responsible, so when they all came back to the village, the priest of the possessed souls summoned the dancers, and there was a dance of possession. During the dance, Dongo, the spirit of thunder—through the mouth of the dancer he possessed—washed Umaru free of all blame. Otherwise he would not have remained chief, and everybody would have despised him.'

'And you think it was Umaru who ordered his son to go away?'

'I'm not sure, but I hope to find out here—at present I have no idea where I stand. It doesn't look as good as I thought, but nor is it as bad as you might suppose. I can be sure of Ayissata, I shall bring Issufu back if I find him, the wedding can be put forward. But to tell you if the hunt will take place, and when—well, that depends a bit on me, a bit on Umaru, and a good deal on the gods. I can simply remind the harpooners of the promise once made: "A white hunter, who is not a son of Sorko, will help you get the old giant out of the great river." *Will help you*, these are the words that worry me, because they can be interpreted in different ways. Umaru says I shall help them, for instance, by supplying a new rope to tie the hippo when he's harpooned; but most of the fishermen say: "It's the white man who must kill." I talked about it with them night after night, but then I had to go away. Today we must talk about it again, for the doubt remains.'

'Look!' yelled Duma. 'It's Talu Mussurani, my little Bellah friend, paddling Umaru's canoe.' He dashed off to where the boat was landing. 'Talu—what are *you* doing here?'

'Dyam, I'd been pricked enough with injections at Ayoru,' the boy answered, 'so I came to wait for you here, where I've cooked and fetched wood. Oh, I've been waiting for you a long time, but this village is a good village, it has fed me well.' The cheerful, frizzy-haired Talu tapped his stomach, laughing. He had a falsetto voice, a partially crippled arm, and an evident disregard for his clothes, which were in rags.

'Hullo, Duma,' said Umaru. 'You always lead the way for the white men like their dog.'

'And you, old grandfather, your horse is always the canoe.'

'Oh wisest and greatest chief of the Sorkos, greetings!' said Adamu. 'And may Dongo give me as good a head as you have on your shoulders.'

'Hullo, Adamu. Is your arm still as strong, and your heart as stout?'

'Both more than ever, thank God.'

'Hullo, Ramana. Peace and health to you. Peace and health to the other white man. Peace and health to Lam. Listen, Lam, here is a young Bellah rogue who can paddle a canoe, fetch wood and wash clothes. He wants to help you.'

'He hasn't a very big arm,' said Lam, 'but his eye is sharp.'

'My father was a thief-man, a rogue and a liar,' said Talu. 'He taught me many things, and you will see that a small arm, working for its friends, is stronger than a big arm.'

'I like this young rogue,' said Lam under his breath.

'Talu Mussurani, you're engaged. You can help Lam and Duma.'

Talu began rolling in the dust, roaring with delighted laughter.

'And you, Umaru,' said Hermann, 'the years pass and you do not change. Not a thread of white in your hair, and your eye as penetrating as ever.' He stroked the chief's head, and they clasped hands.

'Ah yes, Ramana—but the children grow up, and one day you yield your place to them.'

'Let's cross to the island before nightfall,' said Hermann. 'There's a lot of stuff to unload, and I'd like to fix my house up by this evening.'

Luc noticed that he had evaded an obvious lead-in to the subject of Issufu's departure. Evidently with the old chief, as with a crocodile, a frontal attack did not pay.

When they landed at Firgun, they found a young man waiting for them, who greeted Hermann affectionately and then greeted Luc. 'I am a messenger from Ayissata,' he told Luc. 'My name is Illo, son of Goudel, my village is Kutugu, and she, Ayissata, is my sister. I have secret words for the white men.'

Leaving his message till later, they went off to the south of the island, and chose a site for their camp, a piece of level ground with some palm-trees round it. While Hermann, Luc and Adamu set out to greet the villagers, the rest 'fixed the house up'. They built a sort of shed, acting as a sun-break, with dried millet-thatch stuck on poles, both poles and thatch having been left for them by the people of Firgun. Beneath this they set up the white men's camp-beds and mosquito-nets. Another shed, already erected by Talu, was intended for the rest of the party. Nearer the river Lam was making a pile of firewood, while Duma and Talu put up another millet-thatch shelter for the folding table and deck-chairs. From now on it was here the white men would receive their friends, talk with them, and have their meals.

Luc strolled on amidst squawking chickens, children who yelled and ran away in terror at sight of the white man, and friendly greetings from men and women emerging from their huts to examine him with curiosity. Adamu had stopped near a fisherman's hut 'to greet friends', and Luc had left Hermann and Umaru on their own; but he was then joined by Illo, Ayissata's brother.

'Where do the Sorko fishermen live?' he asked Illo.

'Mainly at Firgun and Kutugu,' was the answer. 'Kutugu is a day's journey by canoe to the north. There are a few living

at Ayoru too, but you may see some of the Ayoru men here, and I expect there'll be more in the next few days. It is time for palavers, Ramana must speak to us all, and Umaru too. The fishermen are waiting. You know about the last hunt?'

'Yes, I know about the last hunt, and that is why we are here.'

'It happened long ago, but it has not been forgotten. Idrissa was from Kutugu, and we, the people of Kutugu, were affronted by the old giant. So was Ramana. Now that affront must be wiped out, wiped out quickly.'

'The fishermen of Kutugu are ready?'

'Yes, and this is the secret message I had for the white men. All ready, but angry at heart. Umaru has not even had the wood cut for the big boat, yet Ramana wrote to him—I was told of the letter by the postman from Ayoru.'

'What big boat?'

'The one to be used as anchor for the hippo. You need swift little canoes with two or three men on them to hurl the harpoons. Afterwards the lines of the harpoons are tied to the big boat, the hippo tires himself out trying to drag it along, and when he is tired—he clapped his hand against the back of his neck—you plant the killer-spear into his head, and he dies.'

'And if he doesn't?'

'Then he smashes the boat and escapes.'

'As the old giant did?'

'Oh yes, the old giant has given us plenty of trouble. He behaved then as if he knew every one of us by name, and attacked the white man's canoe with Idrissa, my cousin, in it. Ramana got away easily, because he was white like the water, and the old devil didn't see him in it. But as for Idrissa—they found his body trampled into the reeds, and we the people of Kutugu wish to wipe out that affront.'

'How can Ramana hurl a harpoon when he is not a Sorko?'

'It is the word of a spirit-horse. Ramana can hurl harpoons, since the spirits require it of him.'

'But I wouldn't have the right, I suppose?'

'You?—no. But you can watch if you don't come too close. Ah, white man, this is a serious business. You are not protected, and if you try to kill, you will die.'

'I only said that to find out. I'm not like Ramana, I didn't come to kill. I am Ramana's friend, and watch what he does.'

'Ah good,' said Illo in relief. 'White men are so mad, you know. At Kumasi—but do not tell anyone of this—I worked for a white man who killed wart-hogs with a spear in India. He had photos of them and kept their tusks. What a mad fool! He had big guns too, but didn't even use them to kill these vicious pigs. Then he drank too much beer and rum, and afterwards his spirits took him and he fell on the ground shouting.'

'D.T.s,' murmured Luc.

'Detes—is that the name of a spirit?'

'If you like, Illo. A great spirit from our country who lives in bottles.'

'These Christian bastards,' said Illo, shaking his head. 'How they drink! The black as well as the white. Afterwards they go and sing in their churches. You should be in Kumasi at Christmas—ah, *there's* a festival! No police to take money off you and beat you up. Rum and beer and gin' are the great rulers then.'

'Do you think the hunt will go ahead, Illo, now Ramana's here?'

'Yes, tell him the Kutugu people are with him. Tell him also: Issufu is a good lad, but he's a young idiot who doesn't listen to his father. This is Illo's message. So Umaru is sad because he is old and his son will not follow him as chief. No fisherman wants Issufu as chief. I am a friend of his, so I can say this: by himself Issufu is very good when it comes to hurling a harpoon from a small canoe, but as for commanding others—never. He hasn't the power. He hasn't a wise head like his father.'

'I will tell all that to Ramana. Good-bye Illo, I am going back to camp. This white man is hungry and sleepy.'

'I shall stay at the village and wait,' said Illo. 'When Ramana comes to tell me, the fishermen of Kutugu must be summoned—away I'll go, and my canoe will fly, yop-yop-yop. . . .' He began paddling in the air. 'All the harpoons are ready at Kutugu!'

* * *

Iꞑuc headed for the river bank on the east of the island, where a few small gardens, with thorn-bushes round them to keep off the fowl, extended in the mud of the Niger's wash right to the water's edge. Opposite him, as evening fell, the millet fields and the white line of the track, dotted with telegraph poles, gradually vanished into the twilight.

This was the main track to Gao, on the Hausa bank, inhabited bush where millet was grown; Bellahs crossed it at night on their cattle, wooden spears in their hands, on the look-out for sleeping guinea fowl. Every now and then the telegraph wires would be cut by the long necks of a family of giraffes stamping over the stubble of dried millet on their way to the river to drink. To see lion in any numbers you had to go more north and east, to the pool of Anderambukani, which they would frequent at nights in the dry season, scaring the herdsmen with their roars; and next morning you could find the carcass of a wart-hog or giraffe, with a great flight of vultures in the sky and hyenas loping off into the undergrowth. Yet no one was much frightened of this part of the bush, and a Fulani carrying a good stick could drive four cows from Gao to Niamey without mishap.

It was different with the other side, the Gurma bank. Here, in the bend of the Niger, the bush was harsh and wild, with antelopes, lions hunting in prides, hippos and great snakes, a bush with a few lonely villages and no wells, filling men's hearts with fearful respect for all the mysterious forces inhabiting it.

Somewhere in the heart of this bush lay Wanzerbi, the

magicians' village, circular huts built round a vulture-haunted tree in the middle of sand and thorn-bush: 'A man from Wanzerbi will come with us if need be; he will protect us.' Luc remembered Hermann's saying this, and realised with a start of amazement that he had unconsciously admitted the principle of such protection. More than admit it, he was now completely involved, like Lam and Adamu, like Hermann himself. Today he thought of Wanzerbi, this remote spot where men controlled the bush by magic, no longer as a village but as the promise of all that should come to pass.

Until today he had followed Hermann without really knowing why. Probably because Hermann represented change, and because the chain of interlocking actions, so logical once you admitted the original premise, left no time to think. Or they left so little time that it would have been no good trying to analyse the thing, to explain the meeting with Hermann or this journey: there was no question to ask, the climax being already accepted—Hermann on his canoe hurling his harpoon.

At any rate the bush and the river, by inter-weaving their black threads, had redefined this final act in terms of themselves, changing the whole nature of the white man's acceptance of it. Luc found it compelling him to integration in the new universe, so that he might continue to believe, not in the myth but in himself. When the Africans renamed him Lussu, they must somehow have known that he was giving up, or would soon give up, the illusory shell of himself for a new definitive body; and for him, Lussu, the myth lit up all the past darkness, leaving him with that fearful joy of the novice to whom light has been granted.

As a mere succession of actions sufficient in themselves to illuminate a chosen moment, the adventure was dead. From now on, born out of the smoking embers, it would be an adventure of the spirit, where you admitted that the concrete action, though a sustaining factor, was no longer an

end in itself. Without making any effort to adapt himself to the thing, Luc thus accepted the key of the mysterious door: that door through which the gods of fire, water, air and earth, would burst forth to aid or destroy those who dared open it.

Suddenly he saw a horse emerge from the water, followed by a naked man with his *bubu* wrapped round his head. The horse shook itself, quivering, then snorted and gave a long neigh. 'He's got the scent of the Isle,' the man said with a smile, as he squatted, modestly concealing his sexual organs between his thighs. Then he unwrapped the *bubu*, brought it down over his shoulders, and put on a pair of trousers he had been carrying.

'You are the new white man, Lussu, Ramana's friend. Peace and health to you! I have come from the market, galloping the whole way. This horse is really very swift.'

'Can all Firgun's horses swim?' asked Luc.

'Yes, only most have to be dragged along by the rein behind a canoe, and their head held above water. This one doesn't need help.'

'And are you a farmer or a fisherman?'

'I am a Sorko by my father and my mother,' was the proud answer. 'My name is Nuhu.'

'Then if you are a Sorko, your harpoons are sharpened, and you are ready for the hippo-hunt.'

'My harpoons are always sharpened,' said the man, pulling at the four hairs of his beard, 'but we're not expecting any great hunt at the moment.' His face expressed complete surprise.

'If you were not a Sorko,' said Luc, 'I should believe you were a great liar. But as you are a Sorko, I merely say: so long!'

'So long,' the man echoed, looking disconcerted. 'Here Lussu, don't run off. You have talked to Umaru?'

'I don't know. I've only just arrived, and am walking round the village, as you see. You don't know anything and nor do I, so why ask such a question?'

'I don't know much,' conceded the other, 'but if there were a hunt one day, that would mean a lot of meat, and perhaps the Sorkos can agree if there's a lot of meat.'

'Except for Umaru, eh?'

'Well, you know, Lussu, Umaru commands, and he's the one who decides. But I say, just on my own, mind: if there were a hunt, it would mean lots of meat, and the women would be pleased and the fishermen would be pleased.'

'We'll talk of it again,' said Luc. 'You're Nuhu, are you?'

'No,' said the man, 'That's not my name.'

'Why do you tell such lies?'

'Well, you see,' smiled the Sorko, 'you have to be on your guard with white men you don't know.'

'And what *are* you called?'

'Here, wait a bit, white man. Today I am without a name.' He began to chuckle. 'After the palavers, if there's a hunt, you will know my name.' He took his horse by the rein and walked off.

Luc watched him go. 'There's one of Umaru's men,' he said to himself, and then began thinking about the meat. A hippo weighs between one and two tons, sometimes much more. He imagined a mountain of dripping red meat, and the village *en fête*. Might these arguments count with the fishermen? Perhaps. I'll talk to Hermann about it.

Night had fallen, and a light breeze was coming from the north, licking over the waters. In the light of a paraffin lamp, Luc saw Hermann just starting his supper.

'Sit down, Luc. You've seen the village?'

'The village, the villagers, the fishermen. And I've a message to give you from Illo.'

'Good—as I hoped. Tell me about it. I've talked to Umaru.'

Luc described briefly the mood of the Kutugu Sorkos, Illo's insistence, and his own meeting with the anonymous fisherman.

'I'm beginning to know where I am, Luc. As for Umaru,

it's very simple. He'll do all he can to delay the hunt. It's our move now: we'll convene all the Sorkos of Kutugu, Ayoru and Firgun. In under forty-eight hours if possible, Umaru agrees to a meeting. When they're here, I'll try to convince them. We've no time to lose . . . Hey, Duma!

Duma came over at once.

'Go and find Illo,' said Hermann. 'He should be in Umaru's compound. Tell him in front of Umaru, and don't be afraid to talk loudly, that I am expecting the people of Kutugu as soon as possible, the day after tomorrow if they can. Ask Umaru to send a canoe to Ayoru telling the Sorkos there to come the day after tomorrow, and he should warn the Firgun Sorkos to stay here tonight. There'll be a meeting and palavers about the hunt.'

Duma ran off, and Luc looked at Hermann, so full of serene strength, a general who has made his dispositions and now awaits the battle, confident that he will come out of it victorious. Here, felt Luc, is a man I can really think of as a brother.

'I don't know if it's me that's changing,' he said, 'but I'm no longer interested in the hunt as a sporting exploit, which was the idea I had of it in Europe. I find it's more a matter of men now, and one we're all involved in. Of course there's a lot I don't understand yet, but I feel I'm in the same stream as all the rest of you—it's hard to explain. I'm accepting this world so different from ours and seeing it as it is. I've come back to essentials.'

Eyes sparkling with pleasure, Hermann clapped him on the shoulder. 'I too found it hard to bring you here and to trust you; the Africans were the only people I ever trusted before, and at first I was afraid you'd think me mad. Thousands of miles away, you know, when I was reasoning about my plans dispassionately, I often felt I could never carry it out. But then this life among the Africans acted like a drug, fortifying me with the power of memory. I remembered the happiness I used to know in following things

through to their end, in realising what an inner force makes you realise: that if you give up your ideal, it will stay with you still as a mark of cowardice that imperceptibly rots all the rest of you. This is what others call "eternal adolescence"—rather scornfully, because they themselves have lost the youth of the heart and the feeling of their own strength.'

'Europe's an old place,' agreed Luc.

'Yes, so old that it chokes you. Only you end up by thinking as they do, and they're the defeated. Oh, a defeat is not that important, it doesn't matter being beaten if you've fought; but in their world it's the permanent acceptance of defeat which finally corrupts your heart. Here in the African world I'm once more face to face with the important things, the only things that really count. Perhaps that's what peace means: to struggle with yourself and with the elements, in the company of men like yourself.'

Both men remained silent for a minute or two, then Hermann called Adamu, who was sitting near the fire with Lam and Talu, slim and bare-chested, wearing only his cloth. This was the hour for talk round the fire, where friends opened their hearts at peace with all the bush, and words of friendship rose in the evening air with the smoke from the fire.

Adamu squatted down near Hermann and Luc in the darkness, and Hermann pushed the lamp away, drawing off the insects towards it. 'Adamu,' he said, 'you know me and you know Lussu. Speak openly, since he is here and will listen to you. Has this boy a good head?'

'He is like a young lion running after an old lion,' Adamu answered. 'He doesn't know much, but he has good claws, and the old lion may set him on good trails, or the young lion may miss these trails—who can tell?'

'You mean that he has a good head, that you can always try to teach him, but you can't tell how much he will learn.'

'Yes, that is what I mean.'

'Adamu, I'd like you to begin from the beginning. Tell

us about the dances of the spirit-horses. This is the night, and the night is good for talk.'

'Yes, "the devils at play"—I can tell you about that. We Sorkos may speak of it if we think fit. We Sorkos are the sons of Farani Maka Boti, a fisherman giant who stuffed his pipe every morning with forty hippos. The spirits were before men, before the little red men who came from the east, and the tall men who came from the north. For a long time the spirits fought amongst themselves. Farani Maka Boti helped them and since then we Sorkos have been friends of the spirits and can talk to them.'

'He's explaining, Luc,' put in Hermann, 'that the Sorkos are spiritual as well as temporal chiefs; the two forms of power overlap and complement each other. Not only here, but in the British colony too, where they're called Sorkawa. It's an aristocracy with fishing rights from the British Niger to north of Gao, and they alone can hunt with the harpoon. Sorry, Adamu—go on about the spirits.'

'Dongo, the greatest of all, is the father of all us Sorkos. When Dongo roars, woe to him who does not listen! And Kirey the red, whose spear is the lightning, is Dongo's brother. And Mussa Gurmanchi, who burns the bush with a fiery arrow hurled from his iron bow, is his brother also. And Sadiara the rainbow, the serpent of many colours, who lets the sky's water glide over her back to bury it in deep wells, is his sister. And Harakwa Dikko commands all running water, it is she who must give permission for the fishermen to hunt the hippos. And Zaberu, the evil grandmother with eyes and wings of fire, who feeds on still-born children—she it is who brings sickness, but can stop epidemics. And Mossi, protector of the fields, who takes a grain of millet and returns you a full stalk. And Bagambayze, the lunatic spirit who says stupid things and loses his temper and gives men troubles. And so many others who are dancing in my head. The ones I have spoken of are the strongest, but there are others to come, and they are evil to those who

haven't the power to talk to them. The last to come were the Haukas, the power of machines and of guns—they eat fire and drink perfumes. There is Caprane Gardi, the corporal, who does drill with a stick. There's Lokotoro, the white-coated doctor, who gives injections. There's Captain Mugu, the cruel official, always laying about him, and many others. The horses of these Hauka spirits are mostly the young men who come back from Kurmi.'

'That's how Africans interpret our civilisation,' observed Hermann.

'And then there are the sorcerers who eat the soul of the millet. They are the Kurumi. They come in September from the bush in the bend of the river, and on their return journey they sit astride the wind. There they are, riding on the east wind, they talk and laugh, they have their wives and greedy children, and their spears are millet stalks to pierce those who try to fight them. These sorcerers are bad, they can bring famine to the whole country. And again, Lussu, you must watch out with all the Africans you meet, for some may have a little golden needle in their eye, and they are the Tierkor, the enemies of the good magicians. In the night they become animals or little wailing children, and they can steal your soul away. If you hear them, and feel your soul is about to split off from you, then plant a knife in the ground while keeping your eyes on the Tierkor, and the Tierkor will die. In some villages—I will tell you if we pass through them—there are very many of these sorcerers.'

Adamu stopped, and Hermann took up the tale. He could not speak first because he was a stranger, even though he had seen many things.

'Adamu has spoken to you of the spirits, and you will see them appear in the dance of the possessed souls. These dances take place in the villages once or twice a month. The spirits have special chants which are intoned and played by the musicians on hollowed-out gourds and the one-stringed fiddle. Then, after hours and hours of dances, the spirits

become flesh in the whirling dancers, who have lent them their souls and so are called spirit-horses. These spirit-horses roll on the ground, drooling and slaving, and through their mouth the spirit speaks. He reproaches, congratulates, answers questions, prophesies. The man who has heard these strange voices, who has shaken these cold hard hands, can never forget it.'

'Yes,' said Adamu, 'that man may be happy or afraid, since all that his ear has heard shall come to pass.'

'All these possessed souls,' Hermann resumed, 'are for the rest of the time quite ordinary young men and women. They have their fits at regular intervals—and with us they would be locked up.'

'But who directs their dances?' Luc asked.

'The priest known as the Zeema,' said Adamu; 'also the "calm women", who trick them out with the adornments and perfumes of their particular spirit; and also the musicians who call the spirits down from the sky by singing their beautiful chants.'

Luc nodded thoughtfully. 'What peace for the soul, to be able to talk to God, ask for counsel of Him and obey His orders.'

'That is their power,' said Hermann. 'Everything is possible that way.'

'Everything,' said Adamu. 'The word of the spirit is like an arrow which flies straight. Woe to him who tries to turn it aside when it passes whistling towards him. Ah, white men, we have had much talk, and the cold is falling on my shoulders. Adamu bids you good-night.'

'The boys are satisfied with their food?' asked Hermann.

'Yes, but don't forget that here at Firgun is the country for ducks. If the white men can kill some, I know many young men who will pluck them and put them on the fire.'

'So that means a little hunt for us,' said Luc. 'Tomorrow, if I can have a canoe and paddlers, I'll show you that my gun is worth fifty harpoons.'

'For the little hunt perhaps,' said Adamu. 'But it's not worth half a harpoon for the old giant.'

'Very true,' agreed Hermann. 'The harpoon is the joy of the heart.'

And on this all three went off to bed.

* * *

The next morning Luc was woken by Adamu.

'Hey, Lussu—the canoe and paddlers are ready. Take your gun, and start quickly, the ducks won't wait.'

The paddlers were indeed there. They were two boys, neither of whom could have been more than ten. They stood very straight, their little stomachs curving out in front of them, extremely proud of their mission; the smaller of the two had a huge umbilical hernia. Luc examined them in dismay: he was to venture on to the rapids with these two small boys! The canoe was long and low, made of two hollowed tree-trunks stitched together at their centre; and when he was sitting on the dried reeds they had arranged for him, he saw that the sides of the boat were only an inch or two above water. The little paddlers, one in front and one behind, were already launching out into the river; in a few seconds they had left the calm waters of the bank and were in the current. Luc dared not move. The bottom of the boat was gradually shipping water, the two boys were paddling hard and laughing. 'God have mercy!' he muttered, and looked at the boy with the hernia, who was behind him, using the paddle as a rudder.

Luc unfolded his arms, drawing a deep breath, and began to whistle carelessly. 'Tya-tya,' said the boys, chortling; and he decided this must be the name of the whistling duck, which he had by accident imitated. But in a moment the elder boy put a finger over his lips as a sign to keep quiet.

They steered in silence through a maze of small islands. The archipelago extended farther than the eye could see, and each island, like all the banks of the river, was surrounded by a dense forest of reeds. This was the sweet-stalked

burgu which fed the hippos, protected the banks and checked the canoes. The boys put down their paddles and punted through the *burgu* with long wooden poles. Sometimes you could make out little hillocks of bushes and trees, or rocks of smooth granite, but it was hard to say where land began.

Luc felt he was lost in these green lianas which fell back on their shoulders when the boat had passed, leaving a momentary trail that immediately closed up again. Idrissa must have died and the old giant triumphed, he thought, in just such a green fringe of the river, where *burgu* covers the stagnant waters like a thick carpet. Each shove from the poles brought a protracted rustling as the tall reeds were crushed under the sides of the boat; then they straightened out again behind it, drawing their long arms tight shut over the whole place where the boat had been.

When the boys pulled out their poles, the slight impetus sent the boat gliding on for a short while, in a taut silence where every half-heard noise was magnified. Fishes leaping; a distant crocodile slithering down into the river; a snake gliding past in a flash beneath the water or into the reeds, you couldn't tell which; a nearby flight of unseen birds, followed by a beating of wings as they passed above in a square of cloudless sky bounded by the great green reeds: all these noises were like blood pulsing in the old river's body.

Here was no longer a good-natured giant you could face in full stream; here the river was armed with all the power and cunning of Harakwa Dikko, the long-fingered one, protecting her children. Here where her secret places had been violated, in the silence of her endless labour, she had ceased to be the mother with swollen breasts who fed the fields of rice and millet; she was the white-veiled spirit who had tasted blood times beyond number. Luc thought of all the nameless blood she had fed on in slaughters long past, of all the blood the fishermen might soon bring her in fearful homage, so that she might respect once more the sacred truce, forgetful of her dead and theirs.

She would battle fiercely, defending herself with all her forces: by the snake and the reeds, the bite and the wind, the rock and the thorn, she would wound men in body and mind. And if her power were triumphant on the old river's stagnant waters, ghostly canoes would for ever steer in silence through the night, with men standing in front to harpoon the stars: if her power triumphed. If it did not, then black men, their rough hands snatching a bunch of reeds from her green hair, would break away into the safety of the main stream, nourished by distant waters and the rains of heaven. They would return to their villages and tell their wives: see these reeds, we have snatched them from the old river, they are there, withered, at your feet; and here are our hands, our harpoons, which have conquered the old giant.

The canoe moved forward, like a lost patrol. Luc peered ahead, listening to the bush, the water and the wind. All was solitude, and there was nothing to help them. They alone must cleave a path, must find what they were looking for, and try to bring it back to their base—if it was really susceptible to capture.

The boys leaned on their poles one last time, then the nose of the boat pierced the curtain of reeds. Lowering himself slowly, the boy in front said: 'Tya-tya', and pointed to a gathering of ducks with dark glossy wings and wide black beaks. Settled a few yards away, on rocks whitened with droppings that stood out in the water, they turned their heads in all directions with a strange mechanical movement. They were just beginning to show alarm at the sharp warning cries and sudden flight of their sentinels.

Luc brought the gun to his shoulder, and almost without aiming, fired twice, trying to cover the widest area possible. He reloaded and at once fired again, but was afraid the last volley had been wasted, for the ducks were flying swiftly away. The little black boys, however, had left the boat and were waist-deep in the water, chasing the wounded birds in

the river's main stream. They swam back to throw Luc armfuls of ducks, then set off again, beating their arms and splashing wildly, to collect the birds that could no longer fly and were trying to dive back into the current. Luc was soaked, the bottom of the boat filled up with straw, water and feathers. He slung the gun over his shoulder and counted the ducks, finally wringing the necks of the wounded ones. All the free space in front of him was now full of small birds, the last still feebly moving their feet. The two boys were happy, and the younger stroked his hernia lovingly, as he looked at the canoe's load.

'At least fifty ducks,' said Luc.

They did not understand, and began to laugh.

He made a sign for them to turn back, and they headed for the isle again. On the way, in their shrill little treble voices, they sang of the white man's power; hearing the singing from afar, the people of Firgun knew there had been many ducks killed that morning.

* * *

Luc found Hermann waiting, well satisfied. The Ayoru fishermen were already there, and only the Kutugu men were still to come. Hermann distributed some of the ducks among the people of Firgun and gave some to the fishermen; Duma carried the rest off to the kitchen. 'The festival of the bellies,' he told Lam happily, forgetful of the prophecies. That night, however, he had bad indigestion, and next morning Adamu jeered: 'The spirits gave him a good warning, but this slave has a belly bigger than a fisherman's net and a head as big as a grain of rice.' Everyone laughed, and Duma received treatment from Luc.

The evening of that day, all the Sorkos being finally assembled, the big meeting could take place. They all went up to the Firgun tumulus, where Talu Mussurani had lit a large fire. In the centre sat Hermann, Umaru, Luc and Adamu, with the fishermen of the three villages at their sides. From Firgun were Luc's anonymous friend and a real

Nuhu, Mukaila, and Wali the *griot*. From Ayoru were Dani Dubi, who forged the harpoons, Nuhu-of-the-Isle, Suley, and Mamadu-of-the-Isle; from Kutugu the four Goudel brothers, Illo, Chekor the crocodile-fisher, Billo the surest wielder of the killer-spear, and Baraki; and others who were also kinsmen of the Goudels—Issaka the one-eyed, Karimu, Mamadu-of-the-river-bank, Damuri (brother of the dead Idrissa) and Abdu, young and strong as a bull.

The only men missing were Issufu and Dankulo. Dankulo had left one day for the Gold Coast, going as spare mechanic on a lorry bound for Mecca; his driver sold him in the Sudan, so at present he was a slave on the shores of the Red Sea. When his brother Karimu got wind of it, he went to Accra to make a fuss; but the driver repaid him the money acquired from Dankulo's sale, plus compensation; and the business was therefore closed, barring the unlikely event of Dankulo's return.

Illo was telling Luc all this while the men took their places round the fire, clad in their blue *bubus* and blankets of woven cotton—for the night was cold.

Luc picked out the anonymous fisherman. 'You've found your name again?' he said.

'My name is Abdulai,' said the man with a smile, 'and I am Issufu's friend. A fortnight ago I was with him on the road to Kurmi, but I returned because one evening the spirits told me to come back quickly.'

'Dyam!' exclaimed Luc in surprise, realising with a start that he was using the native oath. 'You were with Issufu?'

'Yes, I left him on an English truck, just above Dahomey. I really don't know when he will be back here.'

They stopped talking, for Umaru was about to address them. He spoke first as the chief of all the Sorkos.

'Here we are, you Sorkos, all met together. The white man, whom you know, is here also. We are all here except my son Issufu, who has gone off to Kurmi to earn money to pay his bride-price. I am still here to steer you in the middle

of the stream, to avoid the shallows, and to keep you alive with God's aid. I know that the white man and other fishermen wish to set out on the hippo-hunt. And everyone has forgotten the last hunt, has forgotten the women's insults when we returned, has forgotten that the white man was nearly killed and that Idrissa died.'

He lifted his hands towards the sky, and his voice rose in anger. 'Will the Sorkos always remain children? "Ah, Umaru, if they'd listened to you, nobody would have hurled a harpoon at the old giant!"—which of you did not say that when we came back? You all said it. And today half of you have forgotten everything and want to renew the battle. Now once again you seem to think a hunt as hard as this can be carried on without obeying a chief. Well, if you no longer need a chief, or if you wish to have another at your head—here are my harpoons, let him take them and stand in my place. Only, when misfortune strikes you, do not come weeping round my compound saying: "Umaru, the river has a spell on it, please help us today"—because that day the door of my compound will stay shut. None of you says anything, yet just now we could hear the Kutugu Sorkos shouting angrily by the river-side. Have they lost their tongues all of a sudden?'

'Do not insult the Kutugu Sorkos,' said Issaka the one-eyed. 'There is one thought in their minds, and that is that the women and children have not eaten meat for a long time. I have a son, a Sorko like all of you, and he does not even know the taste of hippo's meat. Yet what is there better for a Sorko's stomach than the meat of the hippo?'

'I have another question,' said Damuri, brother of Idrissa. 'Why did our ancestors bequeath us their harpoons if we do not obey the harpoon chants?'

'Kill, kill without stopping, oh sons of Farani Maka Boti,' chanted Wali the *griot*. 'This man has spoken justly, but if the Sorko is to kill, he must kill with the consent of Harakwa Dikko, the spirit of the great river. Well, what did

Harakwa say the last time she spoke? "I give you two hippos," she said—and what did the Sorkos do? They killed the two hippos promised, and all was well, till a mad dog hurled his harpoon on the old giant. After that everything began to go wrong.'

'The mad dog,' said Hermann, 'has asked pardon of Harakwa and of Dongo; he has paid for his sin. If you Sorkos have not forgotten, Dongo and Harakwa have, since they allow me to speak to you this evening.'

'That's very true,' said Illo. 'You're all starting on the same old things again. Your beard has grown long and become white, Umaru, yet you, the wise head, keep repeating the same things over and over again, like an old woman.'

'You talk loud, Illo,' said Abdulai, 'but you forget that when you were still suckling at your mother's breast, the hippos killed by Umaru were making food for your father.'

'For my part,' said Illo, flinging his beret to the ground in fury, 'when I win food for others, I don't boast about it right till the next season . . .' Then he stopped, because he was young and knew he was in the wrong.

'I let the children speak,' said Umaru. 'Whether they weep or sing or laugh, they are our children. You have spoken of the white man, Wali, and you have told him what I thought of him then. A mad dog would not have done what he did. But that is the past. Only, who can trust him today? Who will take Idrissa's place on his canoe?'

'I will,' said Billo Goudel. 'And all of you know me. If I, Billo, go with Ramana, it is because I know the spirits are friendly to him. You Firgun Sorkos also forget one thing, the word of Harakwa: A white man will come and will help us. And this white man has not yet helped us, so the word of Harakwa is still good.'

'That word,' Umaru broke in, 'means only that he will help us to drag the hippos out of the water, but not to kill them.'

'Well, I think the opposite,' said Chekor. 'The white man

is going to kill, and the slaves will drag the hippos out of the water. What are you saying, Umaru? This white man is neither a butcher to carve meat, nor a slave to carry it, nor a cook to roast it. If he is any of these things, then I, a Sorko, am a slave.'

Everyone began laughing at this, except for Umaru, who bowed his head. 'Well,' he declared, 'Idrissa is dead, and we came back with the women's abuse in our ears. We did not listen to the spirits, neither to Dongo nor to Harakwa; nor did you follow me, your chief. So I tell you today, and I speak for the people of Firgun: my son is not here, and all the Sorkos must be there for a hunt, so we Firgun fishermen will not go on it.'

'Old chief,' said Hermann, putting his arm affectionately around Umaru's shoulder, 'do not get angry. You are still in command, and even those who shout and talk loudest are content with you; for years you have led them to victory. No one is talking of replacing you, and we shall obey all the orders you may give. I first of all, because now I know. As for your son Issufu, you are right, he must take part in the hunt. Therefore, I am off to Kurmi to look for him, and to bring him back with the money for his marriage. He will be a man when he goes on the hunt: he will return from Kurmi and get married. Ayissata agrees to put forward the day of the marriage, and Adiza is content. If that is your last objection it has ceased to exist.'

'What wise words I hear!' said Wali. 'If Ayissata has spoken, who can now go against her, unless he wants to be mocked at the markets in every song she sings?'

'I would like to speak now,' said Luc. 'The spirits stopped Abdulai when he was on his way to Kurmi; they told him to return. I ask you all: if the spirits were already against the hunt, would they make a Sorko return for nothing at all, would they upset his plans like that just for fun?'

'That's very true,' said Abdulai. 'They told me: return quickly, by night if need be—and here I am.'

Wali nodded gravely in assent, as Adamu began to speak: 'One night at Niamey the spirit-horses were dancing, and I was walking by the river. I had nothing special to do there, I was simply walking. When I heard Dongo's tune, I had to go and see the dancers. Lam and Duma were already there. Dongo saw all three of us. He spoke softly to Lam, and I don't know what he said. Then he spoke louder to Duma and told him his belly was too big, his appetite enormous, and that birds would make him ill; last night Duma was ill, he breathed through his mouth like a fish out of water and rolled his great eyes—it was the ducks that made him ill because he ate too much of them.

'Then Dongo came to me and told me: "You are a Sorko, listen carefully to what I say. You are going on the hunt, and you will see great things. There will be a spell on the river, the bush will be evil, and it will cost much to free the water again. I shall strike down those who do not obey me. Divisions will break out among the fishermen, and as long as there are divisions, nothing will go right. If peace is made, perhaps I will help them, but even then they will have to pay dearly. And you, Sorko, open your eyes well when you see a man carrying three sheaves of millet on his head, who does not look at you when you greet him: that man is evil, and misfortune then will be near. But now I, Dongo, will tell you something else: I have a white horse who comes from afar for this hunt. He is a good horse, and you can follow him." After this message from Dongo, having paid money and prayed that the evil be averted, I departed. And today I, Adamu, follow the trail of the white horse, that is why I am with Ramana.'

'I know that too,' said Illo, 'Lam told me about it. We must be very careful amongst ourselves, and with the great giant too, for he is strong.'

Then Hermann rose and addressed them all: 'How can we let the women and children cross the river? How can there be farmers mad enough to go into the bush again, with

the old giant lying in wait for them to smash their canoes and break their bones? Who can wipe out so great a shame if not he that received the affront? Who better than he can remember the great-hearted Idrissa, his chant and his spirit?"

'Who better than Issufu my son?' said Umaru. 'Issufu was circumcised that very day.'

'Have you any idea what you're saying?' cried Hermann, suddenly white with rage. 'I was alone in the reeds with Idrissa and the old giant, and I know, I tell you, that I'm the man who must hurl the harpoon.'

'These are foolish words,' Chekor broke in. 'One man has the right to kill that hippo. Whether it is you, Ramana, or Issufu, Umaru's son, that man alone will see the hippo's head rise before his canoe. Then he can hurl his harpoon into the old giant, who will belong to him at that time but not a second sooner.'

'Yes,' nodded Dani Dubi. 'The old monster has already been hit once, but no one killed him. The man who hits him a second time will kill him. Why talk before that hour?'

'Well,' said Umaru, 'we shall see who possesses the greater magic charms, whether it is you, the white horse of Dongo, or my son Issufu.'

'You have said "yes", you agree to the hunt . . .' Hermann embraced him joyfully. 'The old man is always the strongest. Ah, you fishermen, if the chief says "yes" you will not say "no"?''

The people of Ayoru and Kutugu smiled and shook their heads. Then Abdulai rose to speak for the Firgun Sorkos.

'We shall do what the chief asks, but three points must be respected. First, Issufu must take part in the hunt, it cannot go ahead without him. Next, we must ask the spirits before the hunt whether they permit us to start and how many hippos they authorise us to kill—before we start, we must vow to obey them. And thirdly, you, Ramana, must change

your name. The old giant knows you, you will attract all the evil on to you, and that is not good. If we wish to avoid a man's death, these three things I have just spoken of must be respected.'

'And I accept all three,' said Hermann. 'As far as I am concerned, all that is ordered shall be carried out, and nothing shall be done which goes against these things.'

'We of Kutugu also agree,' said Chekor. 'If Harakwa forbids us to attack the old giant, we shall abandon Ramana, who will be left alone. If Harakwa says nothing about it, we shall kill the old giant. So do not forget, any of you, the Kutugu men will be out to kill him, and that is our vow today, whether Ramana brings back Issufu or not. For if he returns without Issufu, we shall still go on the hunt, and if you refuse, Umaru, we shall choose another chief. The family of the Goudels is strong enough to talk to the river and the thunder.'

He stopped and looked hard at Umaru. A deep silence followed. The others were grave because Chekor had said today what they had been thinking for a long time. If Umaru refused the hunt, one of the Goudel brothers would become chief.

'I ask for peace among all the Sorkos,' said Hermann; 'and do not let us forget the word which Dongo gave to Adamu: if hearts rise in anger, no good will come of it. You know very well, Chekor, that Umaru has led you on the right road for a long time, so why make trouble today just because you have many Kutugu men behind you?'

'Put each of us alone on a canoe,' said Chekor, 'and you'll see which is the first to bring back a hippo.'

'It will be you,' declared his brother Billo; 'but put twenty Sorkos together for each of you to command for a month, and Umaru will swallow you like a small grain of millet.'

'Oh yes,' agreed Wali. 'Controlling twenty Sorkos is harder than killing a hundred hippos.'

'That's true,' said Hermann. 'We need peace, peace between all of you, if we wish to conquer; otherwise we shall be beaten. Look, Chekor, and you, Umaru: here are my hands. Clasp them, they are your hands, and this is our friendship. I ask you to do it, Chekor, because you are like a brother to me.'

Chekor began to weep with emotion. Then Wali the *griot*, cutting a chicken's throat with a harpoon blade to seal the pact, sang the Sorko chants; and all the men listened, moved to tears as they heard the names and power of their ancestors.

I speak to God

I speak to Hassani

I speak to Hini

I speak to Dandu Urfama

The Saviour of those who call from afar.

I speak to Bosso

I speak to Diandiami

We speak to Farani Maka Boti

We speak to Hassani

We speak to Hini

We speak to the father of the grandfather of Si.

We speak to him that was begotten of Si.

N'gari Fombo

Diga Fombo

Digial Fombo

Turo Fombo

Alagyiri Fombo

The family is complete.

We speak to Dongo begotten of Si.

He overcame the cunning of his father.

He was not herdsman, he was chief.

We are here in your hands which you close.

Let the heavens be hot and the earth be hot.

The Sorkos are begotten of Farani Maka.

When Dongo strikes a man, the Sorkos say: it is well.

With Urfama all was begun.
He had Kayamun as son
Kayamun had Dikko as son
Dikko begat Kirey begat Mahama
Begat Hausakwa begat Neyanga
Begat Dongo begat Farambaru

They were all born of nought but their ancestor.
If one of them is not there, the hunt will not take place.
They have come together only for the harpoon.
Heaven and earth are in the hands of Dongo,
The keeper of most solemn secrets.
God created him for the power of the Sorkos.

Let Him be strong, strong. Very strong. Let Him strike
a mighty blow.

'At this hour the night on our shoulders is cold as a harpoon handle,' said Umaru, 'but our hearts are warm again, and the white man is like a son we have adopted.'

'And I have good news for the Sorkos,' said Issaka the one-eyed, as they all prepared to leave. 'Billo my cousin went down from Kutugu and harpooned a crocodile, and Chekor his brother a manatee seal. A little thief-man of a Bellah they call Talu is looking after the fire. If he hasn't dipped his fingers in the gravy too much, there'll be something to fill all the Sorkos' stomachs till they burst.'

They all climbed down from the tumulus, and went to the river-side where the rapids sang, behind Umaru's compound, to eat the crocodile and manatee. These were slowly simmering in clay pots over four fires; Talu watched them, licking his fingers from time to time.

'Today,' said Adamu, sitting down, 'the Sorkos are united like the fingers of my hand. Therefore I, Adamu, promise to bring you back from Kurmi a rope thick as a man's wrist, to replace your old ropes for dragging hippos—which are always breaking.'

'Thank you,' replied Umaru. 'That is indeed a fine gift.'

'And I,' added Hermann, 'will pay for all the millet grain eaten during the hunt. Also I will present an English

gramophone and records for Issufu's wedding. With that he'll be able to silence the *griots*, and it won't cost him much either.'

'That's a hard word for me to listen to!' exclaimed Wali.

'Here,' said Hermann, throwing a handful of notes in the air each time he called a name. 'For the Sorkos' spirits . . . Farani Maka Boti . . . Dongo . . . Harakwa Dikko . . .'

All were delighted, and then Luc too threw a handful of notes in the air.

'Lussu is your equal, you do not command him,' said Wali to Hermann.

'I know that, Wali, but perhaps one day he will obey me.'

'Hermann,' said Luc, 'look at these men, who have settled their differences. If there is a secret you must one day tell me, why not do it tonight?'

'No, I can't tell you yet. You will be told the moment you need to know.' He patted Luc lightly on the shoulder.

Then Luc's heart filled with the weight of his solitude. He felt Hélène rise from the depth of his being, push out her roots and spread right over him. Everything else was wiped out, and as he sat there with his head bent over his knees, he knew beyond all doubt that nothing living or dead could ever pluck Hélène from his memory. She was alive in him, carved into his flesh, more sharply in this night of memory than on the day when he held her in his arms. No past actions, no words exchanged, no recollections of a shared second, could add new grace to this untarnished image of her; and in its outline Luc seemed to recognise the immutable firmness of a rock.

What power can free me, he wondered, from this nagging weight of pain, endless and purposeless pain, more like a physical ache than mental suffering? It tilts the balance for me unfairly; yet I know I cannot postpone indefinitely the hour of choice, without deceiving myself—and that would distort the whole nature of the choice. Can I still think of a return one day to Europe and Hélène, which

means the negation of all I am beginning to experience so intensely; or can I live long enough by the infinite grace of pure action to put off till the very last moment the hour of decision?

He had accepted the adventure in the way a boy might accept national service, or going round the world in a sailing-boat, or starting life again in a new country: as a tough training which would lead him to manhood and somehow bring him the fulfilment and self-confidence essential to any real depth of character. But today he discovered that if he wanted to live out this adventure to its logical conclusion, he would have to give up willy-nilly everything that was not integrated in his companion's quest. Behind the daily acceptance of heart-break, he could look towards the blue waters of a deep unearthly peace; but as his love for Hélène brought him the same intensity of pain, he still hesitated between the two paths. Nothing was decided, and the clear outline of Hélène promised as much pain and sorrow as the adventure now beginning.

He was woken from his reverie by a chant that rose in the night. Wali was singing the exploits of the two brothers, Chekor and Billo. Luc listened.

Chekor and Billo are heroes brave.

When the manatees see them, they flee.

When the crocodiles see them, they flee.

And all you hippos, beware their coming.

Chekor and Billo are heroes brave.

No fisherman can outstrip them on the great river.

We need not separate them, they are of the same blood.

They are two alone, there is no third to compare with them.

Chekor and Billo are heroes brave.

The manatees have dashed into the water.

The crocodiles have plunged into the bottom of the river.

The hippos have escaped into the reeds.

But the bold harpooners are hard in pursuit.

Chekor and Billo, here are your ancestors.
Sons of Goudel, son of Mukaila.
Son of Sali, son of Hassani.
In all trials they are the ones who help you.
Sons of Goudel, your power comes from them.
To walk with heads high, sons of Sorko, you must kill.

By now it was the middle of the night. The fires still showed embers glowing faintly as the men parted, hands clasped in trust, hearts swelling with courage. The great palaver was over, and friendship reigned between them.

* * *

'So here we are today,' said Adamu, stretching himself, 'with everything settled for the hunt.'

'Aren't you a bit ahead of things?' Luc suggested. 'We've got to go away and find Issufu first, and then come back here.'

'Still, the main point is achieved,' Hermann told him. 'I always expect the best in my planning, but I'm never surprised if snags crop up. Anyhow, I'd set aside several days to convince them, in this happy land where time doesn't count; so here we are ahead of schedule. Since the Wanzerbi magician won't be here for ten or twelve days, I think we'll have to make a detour and find him on his own ground. The track's very bad, but this time I want everyone here to feel under protection.'

'The wise old man, learning from past mistakes!' Luc chaffed him.

Hermann smiled. 'Sometimes I try to limit the part fate can play. In fact, I trust a good deal to my luck.'

'Luck always has to be helped on,' said Adamu. 'But you have the spirits with you, Ramana, and we all have faith in you.'

'Had you that faith yesterday?' Luc asked.

'Not really,' admitted Adamu. 'Winning in a palaver with fishermen is a hard thing. I doubt if it would have been possible but for the word of Dongo at Niamey.'

'Now we must fix the truck,' said Hermann. 'We load up at once and leave in the morning. First stop Wanzerbi!'

'I am ready to leave,' said Talu Mussurani.

'You'll stay and wait for us,' Hermann decided. 'We'll be back in two or three months.'

'Dyam!' said the boy, and began to cry.

'We've had enough of a good-for-nothing slave who eats like twenty fishermen,' said Adamu.

'Oh Ramana, do take Talu along!' cried Duma vehemently. 'He'll really help us. He laughs all the time, and he can steal better than his father.'

'He's too young, Duma. Kurmi is not for boys.'

'But Ramana, look at his arm,' pleaded Duma; 'he broke it in the bush. Then he stuck it in the crotch of a tree and put the bone back in place all by himself. A mere boy couldn't do that. When he has his stick, young Talu is stronger than a man.'

'Yes,' said Lam, 'surely we could take him along with us.'

Talu sat on the ground sobbing loudly. Hermann looked at him, then told Lam: 'Young Talu can't come with us. We're going on a difficult journey into a country none of you know. There are all sorts of things in Kurmi—some people will be friendly, some will be rogues, and there'll be many who would wish to harm us. I can't burden myself, burden all of us, with a mere child, however strong he is. You understand me, Lam?'

'Yes,' said Lam, lowering his eyes. 'Do as you wish. The truck is big, and we have room, but you know better than we do where you are going.'

'Come on, don't cry like a girl,' said Duma, giving Talu a push. 'You'll see us again soon.'

Talu got up and ran off into the village to hide his chagrin. 'I like him,' said Luc; 'it's a pity we have to leave him behind.'

'A pity, a pity—you too are talking like a child. Wait till you see the Gold Coast, then you'll understand. When

you're nursing these three, because the damp will make them ill; when you have to search for them, because they'll get lost in the towns; when you have to give up your fine English pounds to the police, because they'll need getting out of prison: then you'll understand what it means to be responsible for children like these.'

'So the skipper has to be nanny as well,' said Luc.

'Oh, you can laugh, but my idea is to bring Issufu back as quickly as possible, and to do that I can't clutter myself with useless people . . .' He broke off because Umaru had come to say good-bye.

'May you find peace, health, a good road—and Issufu,' said Umaru. 'After that, with God's grace, the hunt and victory.'

They remained a few moments in a silent hand-shake, then Hermann opened his arms and clasped the old chief to his heart.

Four

THEY found the truck waiting for them on the other bank, with Lam warming up the engine. Luc was glad to take the wheel. The quest continued, the unknown awaited them. He felt a warm glow inside; he was happy.

All the way to Tilaberi they had a light, cool breeze with them, but it had disappeared by the early afternoon when they went off to find the ferrymen. Eventually all the ferrymen were there, and loaded the truck on to the sturdy raft of palm-trunks, supported on two canoes lashed together. There were eight paddlers to each boat, who sang to the rhythm of their strokes. It took a good two hours crossing the archipelago with its myriad deserted green isles. At nightfall they landed on the Gurma bank.

'Here's the real bush,' said Lam, 'hard and cruel bush.'

'Bush full of spirits and animals,' said Duma.

'A region strange to men of the river,' said Adamu. 'If we go westwards now, we shall find the Fulani and Tuaregs, and the Gurmanchi, who eat warthogs. After that I do not know.'

'We *are* going westwards,' said Hermann; 'then northwards, and afterwards due south.' As he spoke the last two words, he flung his arms wide to open up dreams of white sails and raging seas.

The next day they were deep in the bush. The track was hardly visible, meandering among the trees and bushes with a mass of tree-roots and pot-holes. The first well was nearly sixty miles ahead of them, and before they reached it two days later, they had had three punctures and been obliged

to change the springs' 'helper-leaf' which broke at a bad bump. The boys were red with laterite dust, their goatskin bottles were almost empty. For the last time in long months they drank the water of the great river.

The well was in a hollow where the thorn-bushes were darker and more exuberant; at present it was being used by some cattle-owning Fulani, whose long-horned cattle had been trampling in the boggy pool. The water they gave these cattle was a sort of liquid mud, which had to be decanted for several hours before it could be filtered.

These Fulani seemed very secretive. They had travelled a long distance, and were suspicious of men not of their own race. Their skin was a reddish brown like copper, and not as black as Lam's. He talked to them, first without saying anything of his origins; but when he found out through various obscure signs that they were 'good men', he told them that he was a Fulani too. In the evening the chief of the herdsmen sent them calabashes of sour milk and rancid butter. Hermann gave them rice and sugar, and they came out with the fact that they were making for Ayoru; on which Duma gave them an introduction to Yakuba. Then they talked half the night about the price of livestock and the markets on the coast. The oldest of the herdsmen recalled that he had gone down as far as Kumasi, and that the people there were 'no good'.

'Just look what happens among the Ashanti,' he said, 'if someone in the royal family dies. People go out in the night to knock down strangers and bring them to the palace. At the funeral the victims have their throats cut to honour the dead. So take care not to separate, and to stay in at night. At the time I was there three Moshi disappeared like that, and no one, not even the people who were with them, has ever heard of them again.'

The boys were much impressed by his words, Duma vowing he would not stir ten yards outside the camp even for the prettiest girl in Kumasi. This was greeted with

ribald comment by Adamu and Lam, who knew the value of Duma's promises on such a matter.

When the two Europeans went to bed, Luc observed that if they drove all day and talked all night, they would be dead beat by the end of the journey.

'Make the best of it,' Hermann answered. 'Africans are like thoroughbreds, they need plenty of food, but I think they sleep on their feet. For years I've wondered how on earth they could get back their strength so quickly with only four or five hours' sleep. You have to get used to this way of life, because here all the important things are always decided at night. The night is essential for Africans, it lets them speak their minds without fear. That suspicious old Fulani would never have talked to us like that about the Gold Coast in the day-time.'

'They've got a secret I'm beginning to believe in and respect,' said Luc. 'When they do talk, their words have a mysterious power we seem to have lost.'

'We *have* lost it,' Hermann answered. 'With us Europeans words have been pouring out for centuries and centuries, so that they've been rubbed flat and smooth like shingle on a beach; they can't even transmit the sound of the water to us any longer.'

'We've become very old,' said Luc. 'And it's a tiring business learning to be young again.'

* * *

'I was scared,' he remarked the next morning. I heard lions all night.'

'So did I,' said Lam. 'Those big dogs smelt the cattle, and they'd have liked to get one to eat.'

'There's a young herdsman who threw a stick in their faces,' laughed Duma. 'These little Fulani are never scared of lions.'

'Threw a stick in their faces!' gasped Luc.

'Yes, Lussu. The lion runs away from a stick, while steel makes him angry.'

'That's why white hunters get mauled with a gun in their hands.' Hermann added. 'Whereas Africans put lions to flight with sticks, just as you'd chase off dogs.'

'Yes,' agreed Duma, 'you know that well, so when you're with us, you only carry a gun to shoot at ducks or antelopes.'

'I have my gun-bearer now,' said Hermann gravely, looking at the three Africans, 'and that's my dear friend Lussu. He will carry a gun all the way through the hippo-hunt.'

'But you can't go hunting hippos with a gun,' cried Adamu in amazement, 'that's a white trick, one for a district officer. Listen, Ramana, you must be pulling our legs.'

'Keep calm, you harpooner. I said that he would bear a gun; but he will follow the hunt without shooting at the hippo.'

'Then why a gun?' Adamu asked.

'It's a secret between us.'

'Discussion over,' said Adamu. 'If it's a secret, keep it well, and may the old giant not find out about it.'

While they were driving on, Luc thought about the gun. Why on earth take a gun if he couldn't use it? Then he forgot about the incident, because Adamu shouted: 'Wanzerbi!' The three boys stopped chattering as they saw a village of straw huts on the horizon near a sand-dune, huts a little yellower than the sand surrounding them.

There was an immense tree pushing its twisted branches towards the sky; the neighing of horses could be heard, and a flight of vultures swept slowly away towards the north.

'The magicians' birds are going off to drink at the Yatakala pool, and tomorrow they'll come back,' said Duma, staring into the sky. 'They were waiting for us, they've seen us, and now they're happy because we're here.'

The village chief, Surgya, was a tall, slim, dignified-looking man, wearing a white robe (or *jellaba*) and a huge muslin turban, his ears and chin hidden in blue cloths.

He held out a hand with long fingers and cracked skin; Luc felt the chill of a huge silver ring against his palm. While they were all greeting him, Surgya looked at them hard without saying anything. Then he sat down on the ground, inviting them to do the same, and placed his long black stick in front of him.

'And *my* greetings to all of you,' he said. 'I have been expecting you. You, Ramana, the boys, and this new white man'—he pointed at Luc—'whom we do not yet know but soon shall.' He smiled. 'I didn't send Baraki to see you at Firgun because he told me you would be coming here soon, so it was not necessary. Baraki expects Ramana and the other white man in his compound tonight. Your three boys, Ramana, can come to me for a sheep. You will be able to pitch your camp by the side of the big tree.'

He was certainly a most regal personality, and his gestures were so elegant that Luc never tired of looking at his hands. Sometimes they drew patterns in the sand, sometimes they described an arc or swift stroke in the air, before falling loosely back into the folds of his *jellaba*. Then he would begin to speak again, and the hands resumed their rapid and unpredictable movements; while at each new flight they made, the heavy ring would swing about, full of sleeping power.

'They pitched their camp under the great tree. All its branches were white with vulture droppings. Dry and bare, as if mummified in sudden death, its wood seemed hard as iron. Like the chief's hands, it too formed arabesques, sketched in the sky. But to appreciate them you needed to walk round the trunk; then the petrified patterns came to life against the grey clouds of the quiet evening. Luc knocked on the trunk, and a dull metallic echo filled the night. Lam, who was roasting some sheep's quarters, turned round.

'Hey, Lussu! At Wanzerbi you must look and listen, you will win all you desire—that's what we say in the bush—but

don't touch anything. You can't tell if by striking that tree you aren't waking some sleeping robber of souls, or upsetting a dead magician who's flying up there with the vultures. Ah yes, I know they're friendly enough here, but who can tell when a friendship may be broken?"

He turned back to his fire, and lifted a shoulder of mutton amidst a crackle of fiery fat. 'This Surgya is a great chief,' he went on, 'he doesn't abuse his power. He could turn a stranger like me into some of these ashes, just like that, without a word. But he doesn't, because he knows I know his power and respect it. You too should respect these people, they are stronger than we are.'

It was hard to explain, but Luc understood what he meant. In all the other villages of the bush the people came to welcome them, out of hospitality, it was true, but also out of curiosity. There was nothing like that here—Luc had hardly seen anybody: one or two fleeting figures who vanished in the maze of sand tracks winding through the straw huts; but not a single woman or child had shown up. Yet he had an obscure feeling that they were expected; he could guess at a silent, hidden life beneath each roof. Here were the five of them, alone round the truck, getting ready for their meal; and their small island of noise extended deep into the village like a growth which was to be tolerated but not assimilated.

Hermann and Luc ate their roast mutton, and whenever they had carved a piece off, Lam put the meat back on the embers. After the meal Hermann reclined in the sand, looking at the stars. The boys were putting up the camp-beds and unfolding the blankets. The sand was still hot from the day's sun, and its caress felt kindly to the Europeans' tired backs.

Propping himself on his elbow, Hermann began talking to Luc, lying near him; Adamu was on Luc's other side.

'Baraki is Surgya's brother. He's one of the most powerful magicians here, and a very old friend of mine. He was to

have come to Firgun, and then the way things developed we came here instead to see him. You'll have realised that neither of us two controls anything any longer—if we ever did control anything since we arrived. Baraki will decide for us, and the best thing to do is obey him.'

'I like Surgya,' said Luc, 'but he has a way of sizing you up which is a bit alarming.'

'It's always frightening to go to Wanzerbi,' Adamu put in. 'You have nothing to sell, and you may return full of shame or full of power.' He blew his nose loudly into the sand.

'Now you can show us the way there, Adamu,' said Hermann. 'The sand is growing cold, and I'd rather we didn't wait any longer, if we're to get any sleep tonight.'

They set off in the moonlight along a narrow path by a straw fence. There was a muffled crunch of sand, churned up by Adamu's sandals. After about a hundred yards they woke a dozing dog, who looked at them without barking, then trotted away, very busy all of a sudden on some mysterious nocturnal activity. They saw a woman quietly suckling a baby outside one of the huts. She dashed back inside, banging against the wooden door-post. Two huts farther on there was an oil-lamp burning.

'It's here,' said Adamu, and they lowered their heads to enter the hut. It smelt rancid and smoky.

'How have you come to the way?' asked Baraki.

'For good.'

'How have you come to the bush?'

'In peace.'

'How have you come to the evening?'

'In peace and health.'

Baraki examined them, smiling. He was old and desiccated, as short as his brother was tall. He had a cheerful, creased face, a little white goatee beard of twenty white hairs, and merry luminous eyes that shone with good humour. His *bubu* and cotton cap, formerly blue, were now a pale watery colour. He had thin arms, and his hands,

seamed with an intricate network of veins, were as delicate as Surgya's. Hermann, Luc and Adamu stood in front of him, and waited for him to speak.

'I'm very pleased,' he said at length. 'I was expecting you, but a little later. I saw here'—he indicated the smooth sand in front of him—'that all would turn out well and that you would have to come. It's this stranger'—he pointed a tapering finger at Luc—'it's this stranger who worried me greatly. Today I know'—he tapped Luc on the knee—'that the stranger is swift and true.' He paused. 'But when he sees a truck going where he wants to go, he dare not climb into it because a girl is detaining him on the road.'

Luc blushed furiously. Hermann glanced towards him, obviously amused by the turn the interview had taken. 'Is it true?' he asked.

'That's going a bit far,' said Luc, still put out. 'Of course I think of what I've left behind—I *am* in the truck, though.'

'The truck hasn't left yet,' said Baraki, 'and you can still think it over. But when you're sitting by the driver's side, it will be too late to think it over.'

After this exchange Hermann spoke of his difficulties with the fishermen, explaining why Issufu must return, and how as soon as he did return they must start hunting the old giant. Now and then Adamu nodded his head gravely.

'About the hunt,' said Baraki, 'I can do nothing for you. You must see Harakoki Dikko, mistress of the water, that is her affair. Here we are the sons of the vulture and we talk with Si Kayamun, Si the dangerous. You have Adamu the Sorko with you, nor is there anything to fear from Dongo, who is helping you. No'—he scratched his head—'I really can't tell you anything about the hunt.'

'But counsel us now, Baraki, and we will obey you,' said Hermann.

'Si has already spoken to me,' the old man declared. 'Si asks you to listen to him and you shall find Issufu.'

What followed took place in a silence broken only by a

periodical noisy splutter from the lamp-wick, which would flare up, smoke for a bit, and then subside into the oil with a yellow flame. Baraki smoothed out the sand in front of him, traced a circle, and drew seven quick lines in it. Then he took seven cowrie shells out of a small leather bag, shiny with sweat, which hung round his neck, and threw them between the white men and himself. This gesture he repeated seven times, and the three others remained reverently silent as the long tapering fingers danced ceaselessly from the cowries to the lines in the sand: consecrated sand with eternal yet changing life, which held the pattern of the coming journey and all its day-to-day happenings. But although in a few months or a few years the journey's trials and ardours would be forgotten, the memory of this timeless minute, bounded by the circle fleetingly traced on alien sand, would live on within them for ever.

Baraki bent his head over his knee, and still he said nothing. He took the cowries and rolled them in the sand, before slipping them back into the bag. Then he made a sign to Adamu, who handed him an earthenware pot lying near. The magician filled his hands with sand, and let it flow through into the pot. The Europeans saw that it was different from the red sand he had gathered; it had become fine and brown. Baraki put the pot down beside him, and now he spoke.

'Listen to the word of Si. There is a spell on the bush down there in the south. The journey is long and hard. You have many twists and turns before you. It is a hard word that I now speak, but so it shall be: the thief-men are against you, but you must work with the thief-men if you want to find Issufu again. You must attend all the dances of the devils; the devils will help you. An old chief, who is blind and ill, will fight you, yet you need his help. Look after the boys well, Ramana, and keep watch over this white man here: he is headstrong and his body may suffer for it. I will give him a private magic charm; if his heart is not spoilt, and

I do not think it is, this charm will be a great help to him. Well then, there is much trouble for all of you. Go to Kurmi by the south of Togoland, for the north is not good for you. Even in the south you will find difficulties put in your way. You must pay money to the police, and then you will come through. Listen to Si. The journey will last a long time, but things will come out well in the end. If men from this country ask help of you, give them help. Always give it, because you will be helped by many who ask for nothing themselves.'

'Thank you,' said Hermann. 'All is good, but the bush is hard.'

'All is good, but the bush is hard,' repeated Baraki. 'And now I shall keep this white man with me . . .'—he pointed to Luc. 'What is he called?'

'Lussu is his name,' said Adamu.

'Lussu remains here with me. Tomorrow you can all come back to see me, and when the sun rises I will give you charms for the journey. I need the whole night, and I am not sure I can finish preparing them.'

When his two companions were gone, Luc said to Baraki. 'I am ready. What must I do?'

The old man made no answer. He rose, felt in a leather bag, and brought out some pieces of black wood and brown bark which he piled up in the middle of the hut. In front of him he placed a vulture's head, a stick, and a copper chain. He sat down and began mumbling in a low voice. Then he lit the fire and looked at Luc, saying: 'Rise, put your arms in the smoke, and rub your skin.'

Luc did as he was told. Then Baraki raised his eyes and began to talk to the being behind Luc whose presence Luc could only feel but not see.

'Oh Si, take the spell off the bush.

The son of Sonni asks his father.

Oh Si, thou hard wooden beam the ants will not attack,

Oh Si, the last of all asks the first of all,

Oh Si, take the spell off the bush.
Si, who fliest in the night.
Who ridest on the vulture,
Who fliest at first cock-crow,
Who takest all souls,
Si, who killest man between the cap and the head,
Who killest man between the shoe and the foot,
Who killest man between the collar and the skin of the
neck—

Oh Si, what thou givest is for me.
As soon as I have it, take no more thought for me.
Oh Si, thou hard wooden beam the ants will not attack.
Come with me and give me the bush.
Give me thy house and take no more thought for me.
Oh Si, the son of Sonni asks his father.
Oh Si, thou holdest me by the hand and I am in the bush.
What is the power of the stick when the vulture and chain
are there?

Oh Si, thou hast given me the bush! And the stick has no
life before the vulture and the chain.

Thy horse runs in the heaven, thy son is here with the
vulture and chain.'

His eyes seemed to start out of his head as he uttered the last
phrases in a hoarse voice, as the other being departed—for
even Baraki could no longer see him. Then Baraki took
Luc's shoulder with his left hand; the right hand, strangely
cold, was pressing hard on Luc's fingers. He began to shake
the arm harder and harder, saying: 'Release the bush,
Captain Mugu. Captain Mugu cannot fight a son of Si. By
the vulture and the chain, release the bush, Captain Mugu.'

Luc felt the words being carved into his memory.

'Learn that well,' said Baraki, 'and when you are in
danger, pronounce those words. Only, for the charm to be
a good one, your heart must be good. Now repeat the
slogan.'

Luc repeated it.

'Good. Never forget this. But you must not talk of it to
anyone, or the charm will be spoilt.'

Luc gave his hands a long clasp before leaving the hut. The night was cold, blood was throbbing in his temples, and his strength was whole and unbroken, because the old magician had awoken in him all that had been sleeping there right from the start.

At the place where they had seen the dog, he found Adamu sitting on the ground, chewing a piece of straw.

'I've been waiting to take you back to camp, Lussu. The village paths seem to change their direction at night, and you might have got lost.'

Following Adamu back, Luc kept repeating to himself: 'Captain Mugu.' Who was this Captain Mugu, and what was his power? Why would the stick be checked by the vulture and the chain? What spirits were concealed behind these three objects?

After saying good-night to Adamu, he curled up in his blankets to wait for sun-rise.

He was woken by a tap on the shoulder from Duma. 'Well, sah, here's your tea, nice and hot, and some rice. Better get up and eat it. Ramana is up already, and we're going to see Baraki.'

It was a path like the one they had taken the previous night, but this morning it was no different from all the other paths in bush villages. Children cried or fled, men and women greeted them ceremoniously. Last night's oppressive silence had broken up, and even the old tree, full of the hieratic vultures with smooth black feathers, croaking away and watching them from above with aloof disdain, now had the intimacy of a roost at home.

In the doorway of the hut Surgya was waiting for them with Baraki.

'How good your sheep tasted!' said Hermann, and offered him a shining blue turban, polished with indigo by women from the west. Surgya was pleased but did not say anything. His brother addressed the two white men, and three Africans.

'Here's a medicine for the truck. You must tie it on somewhere where no one can see it. As for all of *you*, your charm is ready. Only'—he scratched his head—'there is one medicine I did not have. You must go to see Tahiru, the lion-hunter, at Wizebangu, his village. He, and he alone, will complete this magic charm. Tell him that this cake'—he handed Hermann a kind of brown cassava loaf wrapped in leaves—'is complete for everything, except that it lacks strength. Tell him: It only lacks strength—and he will complete it. He is a lion-hunter and knows what must be done. Tahiru keeps his father's strength and he took the strength of Si in his mother's milk. All will be right when he has completed the cake. After that Adamu the Sorko will put on his fisherman's cap and divide the cake into five, one portion for each of you. You will each eat your portion, you must all be united as the fingers of this hand'—he tapped his right hand—'And then, if your hearts are not spoilt, you will find strength, Kurmi, and Issufu.'

'Thank you, Baraki,' said Hermann, 'all shall be done as you ask. But now—we have received many things from you, and you have not yet received anything from us. Would a cow be a good thing for Baraki?'

'A cow is a very good thing,' said Surgya, and Baraki smiled.

'Here then,' said Hermann, putting a five thousand-franc note into Baraki's hand.

'Here, take these from your brother,' Baraki gave Surgya two of the notes.

'Money passes like the wind,' said Adamu, laughing. 'If the charm is good, it should return just as quickly.'

'Dyam,' cried Surgya, 'this Sorko is in a great hurry! You must wait till you get to Kurmi. Down there the man who knows how to look can find notes everywhere.'

'Well, I've got fresh kola-nuts to sell for people who are rich,' said Lam.

'Fresh and crackling,' Duma put in. 'Not at all like

those in your markets, which are like the droppings of donkeys.'

While Lam was selling some calabashes of kola-nuts, Hermann took Luc aside by the truck. 'Pity about the detour,' he said, 'but we must do what he asks. Besides, I've long wanted to meet Tahiru. In the bush, by the winter pools, his is a magic name. I believe he is the only hunter of the Niger bend, he and his assistants. To find other hunters, you have to go right to Tahua. I know *them*, they're the technicians of lion-hunting, whereas Tahiru is half magician as well.'

They left Wanzerbi that morning, and instead of taking the Dori track, branched off southwards, trying to reach Wizebangu as soon as possible. The sand of the steppe, with its short spiky grass, was broken up here and there by an occasional thin bush, twisting in the wind, or an acacia tree with tough wood and gnarled branches. There were also beds of strange flowers, their seeds brought by the westerly Harmattan wind: flowers that had suddenly blossomed in odd corners which had happened to retain the rain-water long enough. When the sand disappeared the acacias' scanty branches rose a little higher, and along this temporary pasture-land there were scattered doum-palms, with a black fan-palm topping them, reaching towards the sky with its smooth foliage. The thorn-trees descended to the ground with their manifold branches interlaced, forming secret lairs where hunters would beat out lions during the dry season.

It was midday, and the winter sun shone brightly down amidst white clouds that drifted off towards the east. This brief season of freshness followed the rains which had been filling the bush pools and wells for months. For some weeks now the dry cold from the north would make old men cough and children shiver; until the dry season began, when the little white clouds had all gone. If their journey went well, it was then they would force the old giant into the great river.

Duma shaded his eyes with his hand. 'At the end of this bad track,' he said, 'I see a village as big as three cow-pats.' And sure enough, behind a high termite mound in the middle of the thorn-trees with their drooping branches, you could just make out a collection of scattered huts, rather widely separated from each other.

'The people living there are very fond of their peace and quiet,' remarked Adamu. 'They're content with very few neighbours, and quite distant neighbours at that.'

'It's small, this village of lion-hunters,' said Lam, 'but it's a village full of power.'

The sand and laterite track produced a last rabbit-hole to shake them up; then the truck stopped by the first hut. A child screamed and dashed off to hide behind a small earthenware oven; he could be heard sobbing at the first sight of the white devils his mother had threatened him with for months. Curiosity made a woman stop grinding her millet; stick in hand, she came out of the little yard which ran along the side of the compound. She smiled, and brought her hand up in a salute. Adamu asked her where Tahiru lived.

'Here,' she answered, pointing to the hut she had just left.

'I believe it's Madame Tahiru in person,' said Adamu, 'and this child who's so scared of white men must be her son.'

'In our country,' Luc remarked, 'children are told: the lion will come and eat you up. But I see that here they're told: the white man will come and take you away.'

Adamu translated, and the woman burst out laughing.

Men and women from the other huts arrived. Everyone was welcoming them, and a boy had already shown them a good site for their camp.

'I come from Wanzerbi,' Hermann announced, 'and I would like to see Tahiru.'

The villagers looked at each other in silence.

'He's not here,' said one old man.

'He's not here, and we really don't know when he'll be back,' added another.

'Oh dear,' said Luc, 'we're not making much progress.'

All of a sudden a young man came out of the group and began to harangue the villagers in a loud voice. He seemed in a bad temper.

'He's telling them off good and strong,' observed Adamu. 'These idiots are only getting what they deserve.'

The young man was wearing a black *bubu* and a woollen beret. 'What!' he cried. 'These strangers come to see Tahiru, and you tell lies to them! They come from Wanz-erbi, and you dare to tell them lies! Today the sons of the Gow hunter caste are afraid of strangers, and tomorrow they'll run away into the bush when they see a rabbit's ears! As a man of this village I'm ashamed—yes, I'm ashamed of these old men who have just been speaking.'

A deep silence followed; then everyone began to talk at once.

'Best just to wait and hope,' said Hermann with a smile, sitting down on the ground.

A few minutes later the young man came over to them, and said: 'There we are—everything's been put right. You can't be too annoyed with these old men: they're like wild boars, they never see anyone, so they're afraid of everybody. Now come with me. Tahiru is in the bush. My brother is one of his assistants, and my name's Sanu.'

'Sanu my son,' said Adamu. 'You come from Kurmi. You got your *bubu* and beret from Kurmi, didn't you!'

'Yes,' Sanu answered in high delight.

Adamu took Luc's sun-glasses, which were lying on the cab seat. 'Fine spectacles to go with a fine turn-out.'

'What a splendid present, a real friend's present!' cried Sanu, as he led the way into the scrub, followed by Hermann, Luc and Adamu.

'Hey, Adamu!' Luc murmured. 'You give presents with my things?'

'Yes,' replied Adamu, showing no trace of embarrassment. 'The young man arranged the interview for us very nicely, and there wasn't anything else I could lay my hands on—to borrow for a gift is better than shame,' he added sententiously.

'All right,' said Luc in a resigned voice. 'You'll lend me your glasses to drive.'

'Of course,' said Adamu, his mind already elsewhere.

'That's how one must give,' observed Hermann, coming up to Luc; and chuckled at Luc's crestfallen face.

They reached a clearing, to find four Africans deep in mysterious activity round earthenware pots, a pile of wood and a worn old leather bag. Sanu went off and spoke to the tallest of the four, who examined them as they stood on the edge of the clearing waiting for a sign to approach. I don't know what they're doing, Luc thought, but we're certainly disturbing them.

The tall African came towards them. He wore nothing but a pair of blue cotton shorts; rippling muscles swelled on his gleaming skin. His eyes were red like a lion's, he had a very straight nose and thick lips. 'I'm Tahiru,' he said, and saluted them.

Hermann returned the salute, told of his journey to Wapzerbi, talked about Baraki, and finally explained why he had made this visit. Tahiru's strange features relaxed into a wide smile; it made this lion-hunter's face look even more leonine.

Then he sent Sanu off and introduced his three assistants: Mussa, Sanu's brother, Dyadye, son of Saley, and Moshi, who was little more than a boy.

Hermann asked whether the presence of three strangers wouldn't disturb them in what looked like secret preparations. Tahiru rubbed his nose hard, sat down on the ground, invited them to do the same and then said: 'I'm in the bush preparing the poison for my arrows. My *nadyi*—my poison—is the *boto*: that's the name of my arrow-poison. I prepare this

nadyi only once a year. I make sixty arrows for myself and twenty each for my assistants. The preparation of the *nadyi* is a bush secret.' He paused dramatically, looked up, and the red eyes were smiling. 'But with friends of Baraki I have no fears. What you are going to see—you will simply forget having seen it.' He tapped Adamu on the shoulder. 'And you the Sorko will see that though our harpoons are quite small, they kill more swiftly than your great spears.'

Adamu laughed. 'I know the power of a real Gow hunter,' he said. 'If we Sorkos fear no creature of the river, you Gows fight anything that runs on four legs, and when the arrow has flown—who can stop it? I, Adamu, am more frightened of your arrow than I am of forty hippos.'

It was fine flattery, and the four Gows smiled with pleasure. Tahiru got up, and with two of his men helping him, he put on a belt of dark leather, stitched together with cowries. Moshi, the very young one, stood near the white men to explain what was going to happen. 'He has put on his belt, and in a few minutes, when he fights the lion, he will be invisible. The lion won't be able to see him when he hurls his arrow, the belt's charm will make him invisible.'

In the middle of the clearing, one knee on the ground, his head bent, Tahiru was concentrating. He remained like this for some while, not making a single move; then he took a handful of ashes and traced a big circle round him.

'He's in the circle. Now he can't come out of it till the *nadyi* is finished,'

His men passed him wood, some stones, and the three earthenware pots, burnt by the fire and smoke. Making a triangle inside the circle, Tahiru quickly constructed three hearths. Then Mussa passed him a calabash of water, which was emptied into the three pots. Tahiru lit the fire under each hearth, and when the water started to boil, he poured part of the contents of the leather bag into each of the pots. The white men could vaguely make out some yellow and brown tree-barks, dried snakes'

heads and little greenish berries, like large barley-seeds.

'The *nadyi*. That's the *nadyi*. The *nadyi* which kills a lion. The *nadyi* stronger even than an elephant.'

While the preparation was cooking, Tahiru stood erect against the sky, his red eyes far away in that bush which he must fight and conquer for his poison to gain its full strength; then he began a strange dance with mime and chant, which was to last till sunset: by dancing he would give the *nadyi* power, breathing into it all the strength his ancestors had bequeathed to him, Tahiru, a Gow hunter, who killed lions because his father had killed them.

'Bu . . . Bu . . . Bu . . . Bu . . . Boto.' The chant rose and fell on the last words. When he said 'Bu Boto', he seemed to be breathing his whole lungs out. He repeated the phrase ceaselessly, over and over again; and when he was sure the poison could hear, he pronounced its chant:

'All life is life
The life of a red ant
The life of an ant
All ways are ways
The way of a termite
The way of a red ant . . .'

For hours on end Tahiru repeated this chant, then he said 'Bu . . . Bu . . . Bu . . . Bu Boto' one last time, and poured the contents of two of the pots into the third. The black liquid, thick, pungent and smoking, continued to boil away on the last hearth. Tahiru pronounced the lion's chant: 'Son of Mani, oh big dog, the wind cannot fall from an ant-hill'. Then he bent an invisible bow, and without a quiver, his body tense, shot from the middle of the embers an invisible arrow that landed on an invisible target. He cried 'Aaaah' and began to roar. He was the lion, and had just been hit. He sank to his knees, fell into the sand, roaring; gave two violent rolls, jerked his leg spasmodically, uttered a last roar, and then let those red eyes drop into the dust.

'All is over,' said Mussa. 'The *nadyi* is good, the lion is dead.'

Tahiru rose, his men came into the circle. He was tired and breathed heavily. Coming up to the white men, he said in an exhausted voice: 'The poison is ready, but I have no more strength. We will go back and leave the coating of the arrows till the evening.'

They returned to the village by the same bush path.

'When will they be hunting, Adamu?' Luc asked on the way.

'Not till the dry season. In May. When there's no more water in the bush and all the animals come from far away to drink at quite a small pool.'

At the village, Lam and Duma, assisted by all the small children of Wizebangu, had prepared the camp round the truck. Luc went up to the Dodge; its tarnished canvas was covered with a thick layer of dust, and in some places the green paint on the steel frame was peeling off. Its squat familiar face gave him pleasure, and to reassure himself that the words spoken in Wanzerbi had not been a dream, he touched the little bag made of stitched hide, with the seven sharp flints lying inside it. The charm was there, under the steering-wheel, firmly attached by a leather strap. Hermann brought Baraki's cake out of the locker, and gave it to Tahiru. They ate chickens roasted on the embers, and drank watered millet in sweetened sour milk out of a big calabash. Tahiru's son was no longer weeping; he had joined all the other children round the camp, and drank with the strangers, smiling at them with his big white eyes. Afterwards he took them to his father's hut.

Lying beyond the hut, Tahiru and Mussa were dipping each arrow in the *nadyi*; the iron points of the arrows were bound up with a thread of cotton. The two men were quite casually checking the poison on the arrows by rubbing them against their palms. The poison was now a sort of liquid tar; by permeating the threads of cotton and the points of the sharpened arrows, it would turn these bamboos into the most deadly weapon of the bush.

The little yard, fenced in by millet straw, was a remarkable place. Long taut bows were drying out; quivers adorned with cowries lay around everywhere; your feet got entangled in arrows which had just been dipped in the poison; and four or five lion-skins served as mats for the guests. The skin on their skulls, having dried on completely round gourds, had taken on the gourds' form, and these carnival-like masks had lost their majesty for ever. There was a strong smell of game coming from the yard, and everything there reminded the white men that Tahiru, Mussa, Dyadye and Moshi were risking their lives against an adversary with quick reflexes, powerful teeth and claws, as strong as four men and swifter than a horse; that their only protections were the leather belt to keep them invisible and the swiftness of their poison, which killed in two or three minutes.

'Here's your cake,' said Tahiru. 'I took great trouble over it, and it has strength. Eat it now, this is a good place.'

Adamu put his cap on and divided the cake. By the oil lamp, all united like the fingers of the right hand, they partook of strength, cunning and friendship; afterwards they talked late into the night. Tahiru spoke of the sun-scorched bush, the smell of big game in the undergrowth, a dead lioness with her cubs all round her, nights of watching near the stagnant pools, the lion leaping behind a bush while the noise of the arrow died away in the thorn-trees. Luc was fascinated by the lion-hunter's words, and his heart was sad that he would never witness that hunt.

Before they left, Tahiru took the two white men aside, saying: 'I'd like to ask a favour of you.'

'Ask it, Tahiru,' said Luc; 'and if we can help you, we will.' He had spoken before Hermann, as if he were the leader; but Hermann said nothing. Luc was beginning to take off his shoulders the old burden so hard to bear alone.

'It's like this,' said Tahiru, after scratching his head and giving a huge smile that crinkled up his nose. 'You see, I

have ten lion-skins to sell and some medicines I make with the heart, claws, mane and fat of lions. I'm going to sell all that in Kurmi. You came from Wanzerbi, and I wasn't expecting you. If we have met each other, it must be for good. Now we have the same way to go, you're going to Kurmi and so am I. I've been there before and I know it well. Why shouldn't the white men take me in their truck?' He repeated his huge smile.

'We can take him, Hermann,' said Luc, 'the truck is large, so one man more or less—he's strong and can help us as he knows the Gold Coast.'

'On your own responsibility then,' Hermann answered. 'Now you also have charge of souls.' He smiled. 'Well, all right, Tahiru. You can come with us, since Luc wishes it.'

'Thank you both. Oh, what good news! The arrow work is finished. I'll roll up my skins, get my few things together, and in an hour I'll be with you.' He was happy and his eyes shone.

'Steady there,' said Hermann, 'we're not leaving till tomorrow morning. There's no hurry, so sleep first; we've a long road ahead. Good night now, son of Gow.'

Back in the camp their beds were close together, and under the mosquito net Luc began talking about Tahiru. 'His face was terrifying when he mimed the lion's death. You felt he had really become a wounded lion.'

'Yes. You know, Luc, if you live daily with the thing you're fighting, I believe in the end you identify yourself with it so much that it becomes part of you, and its presence shows in all your actions.'

'A kind of crazy love,' said Luc.

'A kind of love anyhow.'

They went to sleep, and soon it was morning, with the same thought still stabbing through Luc's head. Is love really a crazy self-love through the object of one's passion? Is one eternally trying to find oneself through constant strife?

Tahiru climbed into the truck. Lam passed his roll of lion-skins, and a cotton blanket and leather bag wrapped in his straw mat.

'I've taken my bow, quiver and seven arrows,' said Tahiru, twanging his bow-string. 'The journey is a hard one, and half of my strength is in this string.'

'Dyam!' Lam exclaimed admiringly. 'A friend like you can open up the whole bush for us.'

'Look how tough his arm is,' said Duma, feeling the bulging muscles. 'He can help us load and unload the truck, then we shan't get so tired.'

Adamu guffawed. 'This great slave keeps looking for help anywhere he can hope to find it. He doesn't need any help, though, when it comes to eating.'

Duma and the other two joined in the laughter. Now the journey was really beginning. After Dori they had ahead of them the unknown bush with scanty grass and thorny savannahs, with huge baobab trees and great dark forests, endless bush under torrential rain. Their hearts would be filled with sorrow and gloom, they would miss the peace of the wide open spaces, the calm of the great river and the heat of the sun: for they were men from the north, their huts and fields and kinsfolk would stay here, testifying to a temporary and agreed exile, accepted only because it was the will of the gods.

Five

THE truck moved off amidst shouts from the children, and cheerful good-byes from the men of Wizebangu. The engine's full-throated roar showed that it had abandoned its constrained existence of the past days, and was once more the primordial power dominating everything. The sword-dance began again beneath the bonnet; steel, fire and water merged in a chorus praising the long straight road unceasingly ravished by the wheels; and behind them the wheels left fleeting clouds of yellow dust which dropped on to the still undergrowth, covering it in a golden silk that the first breath of wind would bear away.

At Dori they saw a European loading his truck with Africans leaving for the Gold Coast. He had shifty eyes and was at pains to avoid them, showing the instinctive suspicion common to 'poor whites' in Africa when they see men of their own colour.

At the village of Boni, Hermann branched southwards to avoid Wagadugu and headed directly for the north of Togoland. When they had gone three-quarters of the way, well before Bogandi, they found the track blocked by the river Sirba, which should have stopped about thirty-five miles farther east if you believed the maps. An embankment had collapsed into the river's swollen waters, and although this continued on the other side, they had two hundred yards of turbid water to cross before they got there. So they walked along the banks, bordered by great mahogany trees, in search of a ford; but there were no fords found that day. On their return they saw Tahiru standing by the truck, quiver to his shoulder, an arrow fixed and the bow drawn—

keeping four Africans covered. He told the white men how he had hidden while they were away, and a moment later seen these four thief-men appear, about to loot the truck.

'My father came to hunt elephant here, years and years ago, and he always told me to watch out for the folk by the Sirba, because they were no good with strangers.'

These latter-day guardians of the Sirba's traditional hospitality were made to undress by Duma and Adamu, who then piled their scanty luggage on the truck and chased them off bare-footed into the bush with long branches.

After this incident Hermann and Luc decided there should be two permanent guards on the vehicle during halts, and also everyone was armed with sticks. Since it proved impossible to cross the Sirba, they went back by the same track and slept the night at Wagadugu. The white men drank *vin rosé* and ate cheese, but found they had lost the taste for it.

The next day they headed for Tenkodogo, and that morning the boys realised that the great red laterite track was taking them into quite different country: cultivated fields dominated by huge baobab trees with pulpy trunks, writhing branches and thin plumes at their tops. The acacias and palms had almost vanished, and the northern bush was fading out before the savannah. After Tenkodogo the grass became taller than the men, and when they were in the hills, shea-trees appeared among the bracken. Before reaching Lama Kara, they killed their last antelope, and ate it sadly one evening beneath big sodden trees. It rained now and then, you could feel that the great forest was near, and the boys were already missing their sun-scorched bush.

One Sunday morning, near a church, they saw a priest and a crowd of Africans in clothes as dark as their skins; neat and smooth, they shone like sad birds. As the bells rang out in full peal, the Songhais' hearts grew wistful at the thought of their own country, where chiefs in white *bubus* climbed down from their horses in a whirl of muslin and red

boots. They saw girls with nothing on but a few leaves, shamelessly showing their thighs; at the sound of the truck these girls fled into teak plantations that were in lines straight as telegraph poles, rising in deep shadow on each side of the road like screens to isolate the passing stranger. The friendly hospitality of the villages was dead. 'Nothing but money counts here,' observed Tahiru, nostalgically tapping his useless quiver.

Their food had changed too; instead of millet and sour milk, it was mostly yams and peanut butter in long coils. Kola-nuts, cloths and torches were half the price these wares fetched in the north.

On a dismal grey afternoon, they entered the great forest, driving along the old Palime track built by the Germans. The sky was leaden, and all the upper halves of the trees were hidden in mist and rain. In this damp green twilight, beneath lowering clouds, the truck ploughed its way along the muddy track. The smooth trunks of acacia and mahogany trees, creepers and unfamiliar palms, tangled foliage agglutinating in a sticky darkness, broken up here and there by sombre, mysterious game-paths that must yet have been made by men. From time to time the strident call of a bird or monkey would pierce the silence, breaking the monotonous rhythm of the rain on the truck's bonnet. Sudden villages appeared, clusters of low houses with roofs of rusty corrugated iron, amidst small streams of red water descending from the hills. As they passed, they were watched by plump, squat, little fuzzy-haired men with squashed-out features, who stood silent and still, letting the rain trickle down their bare shoulders on to their chequered cloths. Hermann, Luc and the boys did not talk amongst themselves, but they knew that in this atmosphere of grim desolation the toll exacted of men by the forest's inscrutable spirits would always be blood and misery.

A bit further on, they were violently abused by one of the little short-legged men, who had an artificial razor-made

parting on his fuzzy hair. He was brandishing a bottle of rum, had cruel eyes and a look of ferocity.

'It's only money and *drink* that counts *here*,' Tahiru amended.

But then one morning of grey sunshine they came to Lomé, on a low ridge surrounded by palms and coconut trees. Inspired by a distant thunder, they drove through the town without stopping, and there by the wharf foaming rollers from the open sea died away on a sandy beach. 'Here's the sea,' Hermann told the excited boys. 'The sea, which is greater than the great river.'

'Dyam!' exclaimed Lam, and brought his hand to his mouth, unable to utter another word.

'Aie, aie!' cried Duma, dancing on one foot and waving his hands about.

Adamu stood stock still, riveted in such sheer astonishment he could not speak. He gazed at the waves, the big cargo-ships lying at anchor in the tide, the little fishermen's canoes clearing the port, and all that endless sea, wider than the widest of all the rivers, extending far beyond the horizon, right to the other side of the world.

Then with one accord the party tore off their clothes, and dashed into the surf. They had found the great water lost so long. It tasted sharp and salty, but the strength of tired bodies was renewed in currents as strong as those of the great river itself.

'So this is the famous sea,' cried Adamu, plunging through the foam with a squeal of delighted laughter.

They stayed in a long time, diving for each other under the water, splashing and ducking each other, and swallowing gallons of water. Then they lay on the beach to dry, and Tahiru told Lam, pointing to a small wooden house over in the east: 'That's Kurmi there. Police guard the way, we shall have to pay them to get through.'

There was a market at Lomé where they gorged on pineapples and oranges, peeled under their eyes by huge

black women, and ate bananas fried in a red oil. Then they got back in the truck; but before the Customs-shed they stopped under coconut trees to drink the milk from fallen coconuts which Tahiru cut open with his cutlass, a broad heavy knife.

The Gold Coast's Customs-officers set about searching the truck, while Hermann went to see the sergeant, whose leather equipment gleamed from much polishing. After some palaver the road into Kurmi was opened up to them by a handful of pound notes.

After the village of Aflao, they had to slow down a bit, although the road was now tarmac, to get used to driving on the left. Also, the trucks they passed shot round corners at such a speed, and with such disregard for vehicles coming the opposite way, that poor Duma was sweating with fear. 'This speed-game makes me very hot,' he explained in answer to Lam's jeers.

'Here's the programme, boys,' said Hermann. 'We have to find Issufu, so we'll look for him at Accra. If he's not there, we'll go to Takoradi, and if he's not there, we'll go to Kumasi. And if we've not found him by then, we'll look for him in the cocoa plantations, the mines and all the forest villages.'

'Issufu wants to make money quickly,' observed Adamu, 'and to make money quickly you have to stay in the towns.'

'Yes,' Luc agreed. 'But if necessary we'll do all the villages in Kurmi as well. We won't go back without Issufu.'

'Look out for the chiefs from the Songhai country,' said Hermann, 'and you, Lam, must talk to any Fulani you see. Try and find out everywhere, and I give you my word now that the one who finds Issufu will have the finest present that can be found in the whole of Kurmi.'

'If it's like that,' said Tahiru, laughing, 'I'll sell my skins and join in the search too.'

'But of course I'm counting on you, you hunter. It's a

hunt without arrows, but the present quarry can bring you in more than your skins will.'

At the Volta the trucks waited in a long queue for their turn to cross the ferry. There was such a mass of vehicles that Hermann decided his party would sleep there. They had dinner just off the road and slept in the truck. Harassed all night by clouds of mosquitoes, they woke up more tired than they had been the night before.

They crossed the Volta with other trucks, all of which bore above the cab a slogan in English which was both the vehicle's name and its driver's juju: 'Get up lazy-bones,' 'A man hit at every corner,' 'Came the dawn,' 'Give me a pound,' 'God preserve me,' 'A bottle of gin and on I go,' 'We've made our will,' 'Hi girls.' Hermann and Luc gazed at these strange devices in fascination. A driver in white-framed sun-glasses and a green jockey-cap with chestnut stripes fell into their arms on learning that they were French. 'The men who made the Revolution of 1789,' he proudly announced to the company; which was at once the excuse for a general round of gin.

'No mosques to stop us now,' said Duma, wiping his mouth; but his eyes watered at the unfamiliar liquor.

'Watch out on that stuff,' said Lam, who had politely stood out of the round. 'If you drink, you'll go off your head.'

Adamu merely looked at Duma in disgust, whereupon he crept back under the tarpaulin, looking very shame-faced.

They left their new friends, and on the road to Accra Duma was rather ill, so he promised everyone he would never again drink a strange drink.

They drove along by coconut trees and palms right in the sand, and skirted a lagoon where wonderful nets, fine as spider's webs, dried in the wind on its banks; then suddenly Accra was ahead of them.

'Now the white men may see the chief of the Songhais,' said Tahiru. 'When the boys from back home come to Kurmi, they always go to see their chiefs in the foreign

quarter of each town. If the chief is good, he gives them good advice, and if he's bad, he takes their money.' After a pause, he concluded: 'I don't know the chief at Accra.'

They went through the suburbs. Water collected in open sewers on each side of the tarmac roads. The farther they went, the denser the crowds became. In the centre of the town the flow of traffic was intense. It was almost impossible to get past the American cars with their gleaming chromium plate, and the open-sided 'mammy-lorries'¹ which plied between the town's different quarters. The markets overflowed from the pavements on to the streets. Under the calm eye of police in red fezzes and khaki puttees, the pedlar 'mammies' were busy setting up shop all over the pavement. Some had wicker-work baskets on their heads, which they put down on the ground; sitting behind these, they proceeded to erect stalls piled high with tins of pilchards, beauty creams, soaps and soap-powders and little tins of pills and medicines. Others, already installed behind boxes where they sold loose cigarettes, pineapples in quarters and sliced bananas, were suckling children impervious to the noise, conversing the while with a whole queue of grannies and girls waiting for their turn at a public hydrant. At first sight it seemed as if the whole female population were either fetching water or selling petty merchandise behind the same boxes and baskets. All along these permanent markets the streets were pervaded by a warm bustling atmosphere of every-day life. Whenever the truck had to stop, Tahiru and Adamu exchanged jokes in Hausa with the mammies.

Then Tahiru asked Hermann to stop the truck near a timber-yard. 'I know the man running this business. He's from Gothey, and all the people working for him are from our country.'

¹ Main form of public transport in Ghana towns, so-called because they are usually crammed with the 'mammies' or small shop-keepers.

'Greetings to you,' said a man engaged in selling firewood. 'You are the people who one day pulled a poor horse out of a hole where he was going to die. He was a greedy horse and looked for food in the bush, but his hooves got caught. You pulled him out, and today the brother of the horse's owner gives you greeting.'

'Well now,' said Hermann, slapping him on the shoulder, 'it's very nice meeting old friends. Who's the boss here?'

'I am,' answered a man, who had just shaken hands with Tahiru.

He wore an Italian felt hat, red spectacles with blue frames, a green silk *bubu*, and was carrying a big leather brief-case.

'All this is yours?' asked Luc, pointing to the shed, where some hundred men were sawing big tree-trunks, piling up the logs, and loading them on to three trucks parked there.

'Yes,' replied the man in the green *bubu*. 'And all these men working for me are boys from back home.'

'But you're richer than a Hausa merchant!'

'Of course,' said the man, plainly flattered.

He opened his brief-case, took out some notes and gave them to Tahiru. 'Some pound notes for the white men's boys. It's a present which always gives pleasure in Kurmi.'

Tahiru divided the money up with his friends, then asked: 'Who's the chief here?'

'Alfa Saibu,' the man replied. 'He lives at Nima village, behind the military hospital. But why see him? You can live here.'

'You are our father,' said Duma, 'and your head is good, but we cannot.'

'No,' said Lam, 'we cannot, we have very hard work ahead of us.'

'We're looking for Issufu, son of Umaru, from the village of Firgun,' said Hermann.

'We're looking for him,' said Adamu, 'because his father has summoned him.'

'And the white men, if they find him, will give him a lot of money,' said Tahiru. 'They will give a lot also to anyone who finds him.' He gazed up at the sky dreamily, as though contemplating the pounds and shillings which would fill the pockets of the man lucky enough to discover Issufu.

'In that case,' said the man in the green *bubu*, 'go and see the chief. I'll tell my friends, and if there's any news, or if Issufu of Firgun, the son of Umaru, is found, I'll let the white men know. Where are you staying?'

'At the Seaview Hotel, Jamestown,' answered Hermann.

'Right, I know it,' said the man, shaking hands with them.

They went through the town, then through the residential quarter on the hill, where the villas were draped in a tangle of dark green bougainvillea, brightened by its mauve and red blossoms. On the gravel paths you could sometimes see Africans dressed in immaculate white; under their red fezes they had the grave withdrawn faces of servants, two generations from the slaves who used to be sold near the rocks of Christianborg.

After leaving this part of the town, they became slightly lost among the winding alleys, till a woman in a blue cloth showed them the way to Alfa Saibu's house. They went into a little courtyard of beaten earth. Some pecking hens flew away at their approach, and a tall thin man in a dirty threadbare *bubu* came out of a mud-brick house with a roof of rusty corrugated iron. He looked towards them, but seemed not to see them; there was a continual rheum oozing from his eyes—he kept wiping it away with a filthy cloth.

'No beauty, is he!' murmured Lam.

There was a child guiding his steps. The child spoke to him, whereupon the old man gave a long racking cough, folded his emaciated legs beneath him, and sank to the ground. Then he wiped his eyes, and told the strangers to sit down. Luc noticed that he had said no words of greeting.

'Who are you and where do you come from?' asked Alfa Saibu.

Adamu explained the purpose of their journey and concluded: 'These two white men and we Africans greet you, old chief. You seem to be afraid of us—well, you are wrong. There is not a single heart here that is spoilt.'

'It takes a long time to find out if a heart is spoilt,' the old man replied. 'My eyes can scarcely see any longer, and the words I hear are very often lies. You say these white men are looking for a man from Firgun called Issufu, son of Umaru. Perhaps these white men are looking for Issufu for military service. Perhaps they are looking for him to do him some harm. Who *are* these white men?'

He had spoken fast and in Adamu's mother tongue, so he gave a start on hearing Hermann answer in the same language.

'Alfa Saibu, I come from far away, and I respect age because old men are wise; but your words are hard. Listen, we come to see you as chief of the Songhais and you receive us like thief-men. Do you think a Sorko fisherman and a Gow hunter would follow me if my heart were spoilt?'

'No,' said Alfa Saibu, who had recovered his composure, 'but can a black man really know the heart of a white man?'

'Those who are with me know me,' said Hermann. 'All we are asking you, is to tell us if you have seen Issufu.'

'I have never seen that man,' said Alfa Saibu. 'He has never been here. Kurmi is big. Search hard for him. For my part I have no idea where he might be.'

'Right,' said Hermann; 'then let's talk of something different. I need food and lodging for these four men. I will pay a pound a day for this. Do you know anyone who can lodge them at that price?'

'A pound!' exclaimed the old man, dazzled. He scratched his head and wiped his eyes, before declaring: 'I will lodge them myself. One pound for the food and the room.' He made some remark to the boy, then turned back to them and said: 'Come and see the house.'

Hermann was now unable to refuse, though the three boys looked ill-pleased; Tahiru's face was expressionless.

Coming back after a visit to their lodgings, Adamu said glumly: 'It's a small corrugated iron shack. There are draughts coming through the floor, but the roof is all right, the window is small, and the door closes properly. We'll have to live there, otherwise the old man will be annoyed.'

'That old man is no good,' said Tahiru.

'Don't forget Baraki's words,' Adamu answered: 'A blind old chief will fight you, but you need his help. I think that old chief is Alfa Saibu.'

'Yes,' agreed Lam, 'it must be Alfa Saibu. His heart is hard, and I don't know why he doesn't like white men.'

Hermann gave the old chief five pounds, then they left the boys and headed for the Seaview Hotel. Jamestown was the fishermen's and dockers' quarter. From the window of the bar they could see the gulf, and a great many lighters going out to unload the big ships lying at anchor in the open sea. The boats came into the harbour full of crates and bales of goods; as soon as they were within reach of the quay, the stevedores jumped into the calm water, which came up to their chests, in a great hurry to unload their craft, for they were paid by the number of trips made. The Seaview barman explained to Hermann and Luc that the wages were wretched, and that the sea-water gave the stevedores various leg and back complaints. 'And then all that water gives them a fine thirst,' he added, wrinkling up his eyes, which was his way of laughing.

Hermann and Luc drank their beer out on the veranda; they much preferred this to their stuffy cabin-style rooms with yellowish light-bulbs and windows in the door that looked like port-holes.

'I'm counting on Tahiru and the boys,' Hermann remarked at dinner. 'They'll question all the Songhais at Accra. Meanwhile we'll go searching in the big stores, and after that we'll try the market.'

They had a terrible night in the damp heat, amidst the yells of drunks and the noise of a tom-tom somewhere in Jamestown. The next morning they went round the stores as planned, but none of the people from the north seemed to know anything about Issufu. So before going to the market, as it was lunch-time, they went out to see the boys in the village of Nima.

Adamu came to meet them, pale with anger. 'The bastards have stolen my box. They dropped hooks through the roof and pulled it out. No one heard anything. Tahiru says if he catches a thief, he'll shoot an arrow through him.'

'This is a bad country,' cried Duma, rolling his eyes.

'And the old chief with streaming eyes,' said Lam, 'just says, tie your kit to one of your feet, then if anyone tries to pull it away, you'll be woken up.'

'This chief is indeed sick and old,' Tahiru put in, 'and he never stops coughing. But his mind is different this morning. He wants to talk to you now, and says it's important.'

They went off to see Alfa Saibu, who was taking the sun outside his hut with his wife, a wizened old woman whose skin was extremely black; she smiled at them. The little boy of the previous night was no longer there.

'You received us badly yesterday,' said Adamu, 'and last night I was robbed of all my things. Your house is evil, and we shall leave it at once.'

'If you've been robbed, I really cannot help it. I received you badly because I do not like the French.' He paused, overcome by a fit of coughing, spat, and eventually continued: 'These two white men are good white men. I have found out about them, and now I can speak. The French made me leave my country, before the war, accusing me falsely, and if it hadn't been for the British, who let me settle here, I don't know where I could have gone. This woman followed me with my two children. One joined the British army, and he died in Burma. The British gave me this.'

The woman got out a dirty old certificate and a medal.

'The Burma Star,' said Hermann, 'Your son was a great soldier.'

'Yes, a great soldier, but he's dead and the British give me money for it, while the French kicked me out of my country.'

'That wasn't us,' said Luc. 'At that time I was no bigger than your son's son.'

'Yes, I know, but from that day on I've mistrusted the French. If the people from the country hadn't told me about Ramana, I wouldn't have said anything.'

'Aha,' said Hermann, suddenly attentive, 'You're going to talk to us?'

'Yes, I am going to talk of this man you are looking for, Issufu of Firgun. He passed through here. I saw him. I don't know where he is today, but Mukaila can tell you about him. Mukaila works at the civilian hospital, he's a latrine-boy. *He* knows Issufu well. That's what I have to tell you, and I have told you because your hearts are not spoiled.'

'Alfa Saibu is a good old papa,' Duma burst out. 'He's seen Issufu, and we're going to find Issufu.'

'Shut up,' Adamu told him rudely, 'The good old man may also know who robbed me, since he knows so many things.'

'I know nothing of this robbery. You must believe me, by all that's holy. I am old, and it's too late for me to work with thief-men.'

'Thank you for telling me this,' said Hermann. 'Is there anything I can offer you in return?'

'My grandson tells me there are lions' skins in the hunter's kit. If I had a skin, I could roll up my old legs in it and then I shouldn't have aches when it rains.'

'Give me a skin, Tahiru. I'll pay you for it.'

At this Alfa Saibu shook his head and smiled. 'You're a good white man, Ramana, but how many bad white

men there are for one good!' He relapsed into his former ill-humour, mumbling quietly to himself.

* * *

They reached the civilian hospital, where they asked for Mukaila. A black nurse told them to wait a few moments, and went off to fetch him.

'What's a latrine-boy?' Duma enquired.

Tahiru chuckled. 'The dung-chief. That's what this Mukaila is—the dung-chief. But here's the beginning of Kurmi's secret. You must never say you've seen a man work. Work is something shameful, they leave home to hide the fact that they're working. It's a secret to be respected, and you must never mention a man's job to his relatives when you go back.'

'Dyam!' said Mukaila, who had just arrived. 'I see a Sorko cap.' He took off Adamu's cap and rubbed his head. 'And this is a Sorko's head.'

'Yes,' replied Adamu. 'You know the Sorkos?'

Mukaila lifted his eyes towards the sky and began reciting the chants of Dongo, while swinging an invisible axe:

'N'gari Fombo
Diga Fombo
Digyal Fombo
Almagiari Fombo . . .'

'Here, stop,' cried Adamu. 'I don't see any fiddles and I don't hear any gourds—but if you go on like that, Dongo will come down!'

'Turo Fombo. The family is complete.'

It was Hermann who had just spoken, and Mukaila looked at him in amazement.

'Dyam! This white man knows our chant.'

After the usual greetings, Hermann told him that the old chief had sent them. Then he asked about Issufu.

'I am Mukaila, and I am chief at Accra of the sect of the Haukas. Alfa Saibu does not like white men who come from France, because once they did him a great injustice, but he's

a good old man, and he was right to tell you to come to see me. I know Issufu well, he also belongs to the Hauka sect, there's a spirit called Captain Mugu who possesses Issufu down there. But the British have stopped the dances. There was a man killed with a knife, so they suppressed the dances. All the same, in four weeks we shall dance.'

'And will Issufu be there?' asked Adamu.

'Er, no—he's gone.' Mukaila suddenly seemed embarrassed. He looked at the ground and did not continue.

'Speak,' cried Adamu. 'In Dongo's name I bid you speak. Issufu's father is asking for his son, and this white man will give him a lot of money. Issufu is our friend.'

'It's like this,' said Mukaila. 'He's gone to work in a gold mine, at Prestea north of Takoradi. Don't ask me any more, that's all I know.'

The white men then brought out several pounds 'to buy Hauka perfume,' and thanked Mukaila warmly.

'What a good friend!' exclaimed Lam. 'He has really helped us. Now Ramana will cry, Quick, quick, boys, we're leaving. Then we'll rush off and load up, without eating anything. Oh, it's a tiring life! Look, Ramana, even our Duma's beginning to get thin.'

'Yes, yes,' Duma confirmed with his usual vehemence, showing his big wrists and sadly pulling out the skin.

They said good-bye to Alfa Saibu, leaving him the rest of the money they had deposited. The old man thanked them and wished them luck; then they were on the road again.

The forest began almost at the gates of the town. They saw palms and coconut trees near lagoons, then big white kapok trees and dark cocoa plantations; they passed men in cloths returning from work, cutlasses in hand, their wives walking in front of them with piles of yams or wood on their heads. They were overtaken by trucks loaded with huge trees, which hurtled along in a frantic discord of shouts, horn-blowing and squealing of brakes. They were back in the darkling bush, and felt far more at home after the bustle

of the town. They drove to Saltpond at one stretch, and slept under the stars as before, while the sea breeze rocked the palms above their heads in a ceaseless metallic creaking.

They made a very early start next morning, travelling by the old forts of Anamabu, Cape Coast and Elmina. In five centuries the garrisons behind these thick battlements had changed from Portuguese to Danish, to Swedish, to Dutch, and to English; but in the vast dungeons with their iron-barred loop-holes the same slaves had waited, with feet chained and neck yoked, till the men from Europe came to save their souls by loading them on boats to sell them at the other end of the earth.

All these forts were built on rocks overlooking the sea, and the waves broke foaming against their granite cliffs. Ancient bronze cannon on their ramparts covered the blue waters of the Gulf of Guinea on one side, and on the other an endless, impenetrable green jungle. Between sea and forest a thin fringe of lead-coloured sand lit up whenever the sun pierced the bluish mist. Fishermen lay dozing near their decorated canoes, waiting till sunset to go and draw in their nets. These were the same canoes that could be seen in the calm waters of lagoons, with a white sail fixed on three poles, gliding off into the dense curtain of coconut trees, scarcely rippling the surface.

Hermann and his party crossed wide rivers swollen by the red torrents of rainwater that were eating away the hills further north. They went through villages with houses of brown clay and thatched roofs, where women were laying out cocoa and coffee beans to dry on large trays. They passed by strange whitewashed gravestones, with men drinking gin near by. Then, just before sunset, as an approaching line-squall filled the black sky with swelling purple clouds, they saw a town with countless roofs, and a port in which cargo-boats were framed by two white lines of docks amidst a jumble of steel cranes. The sea was strewn with floating tree-trunks, which lighters were bringing alongside the big ships; men

jumped between the trunks, assembling them for the cranes amidst a din of whistles and hissing steam.

Luc began to hum:

‘Tobacco goes in your pipe
And rum goes down your throat
Ulla . . . ulla . . .’

It was an old song that had just come back to him, recalling the dreams of his youth. All of a sudden he was happy: dreams always came true when you really wanted them to. He looked towards the south. Behind the horizon was the equator, and straight ahead of him no land at all till the other side of the world.

Hermann drove the truck to the house of a Syrian who kept a small hotel for sailors. The Syrian agreed to keep the truck in his yard, and the boys preferred to sleep there. So after leaving the truck and the four Africans in the Syrian’s yard, Hermann and Luc made for the hotel, which was quite close.

It was a two-storey building in pink plaster with mauve flourishes crowning its columns. Its aged wrought-iron balconies, rusty from long exposure to the elements, gave the house a stilted, old-world look. It only needed the settlers of other days, with their bright scarves and gentle voices, to revive in this hostelry among the wistaria the whole faded charm of a vanished society.

The wind got up, and began to whistle through the branches, bending the trees. The whole street was enveloped in red dust. Lightning flashed from the black sky, tearing the clouds apart. There was a clap of thunder, followed by a swelling dull rumble. All at once the invisible coachman riding the clouds began to crack a thousand whips. The line-squall was there, and huge drops of warm rain bounced off the corrugated iron with an ominous clatter.

‘Get your oilskin,’ said Hermann. ‘We’re off drinking. I know a bar near the port. The rum is good there, and the girls are all right too.’

After braving the fury of the storm, they reached the 'Merchant Navy Bar' and went in. They were the only Europeans. The company was mostly composed of African drivers, sailors and workmen, spending their week's pay with young women in cloths all colours of the rainbow, hair done in small squares, who would now and then get up to dance a samba or rumba, while the men, already drunk, sang in slurred voices:

Everybody likes Saturday night,
Everybody, everybody, everybody,
Everybody likes Saturday night.

Hermann and Luc sat down near the dance floor and asked for a bottle of rum. The men had watched them come in without saying anything. When they were heard talking French, the suspicion disappeared, and a decidedly drunk sailor brought one of the girls over to their table.

'She's scared, the stupid girl, but it shan't be said that you had to stay on your own here. Give her a drink and she'll love the French.'

'Thanks,' said Hermann, smiling. 'You'll have one with us yourself?'

'Yes,' said the man, 'rum gives me strength.'

He drained his glass, wiped his mouth with the back of his sleeve, gave a loud belch, smacked the girl's bottom lightly—she had sat down next to Luc—and said: 'These white men are your friends. Don't be scared, they won't do you any harm.' Then he beamed at them, and went back to his table.

'You're very beautiful,' said Hermann. 'Haven't you got a little friend you could bring along?'

'They're all taken,' she answered, lowering her eyes.

'How about the one by herself over there?' He pointed to a girl sitting near the bar.

'She pass flower,' was the simple answer; and again the eyes were lowered.

'What does she say?' asked Luc.

'That's pidgin English for she's having her period.'

'Oh,' said Luc, blushing furiously.

'What's your name?' Hermann asked.

'Nanya,' said the girl. She was slim, with shapely breasts that stretched the red cloth she wore. Her shoulders were bare.

'Your hair isn't done like the others?'

'I'm not from here. I come from Nigeria.'

'Ah,' said Hermann. 'You look as if you come from the north.'

'My family was from Kano, but my town is Lagos.'

'And your family is here?'

'Yes, my father is a shop-keeper at the market.'

'You work with him?'

'Yes.'

'He lets you go out alone?'

'Yes. It's Saturday night.' She laughed, and tapped the floor with her foot. 'Won't your friend dance with me?'

'Come on,' said Luc, leading her off on to the floor.

Hermann got out his pen, wrote 'good-night' on the label of the bottle, drained his glass, ordered another, drank that as quickly, and went out into the night.

'Hell!' said Luc in dismay, on reading the message.

'Anything wrong? Your friend's gone?'

'Yes. He had a headache.'

'But you're staying, aren't you?' She took his arm. Her hand was horny, but her eyes were very soft.

'Yes, I'm staying.'

'You're staying with me all the evening?'

'Yes.'

He couldn't think what else to say to her. He could smell her, and think of nothing but her skin. She had an amazingly smooth and firm skin. He put his hand on her thigh, and she smiled.

'How old are you?'

'Fifteen.' She looked twenty.

He stretched his legs out under the table, and flung himself back in the chair. God, it was good to let yourself go.

'Like some rum?'

'Yes.'

He served her. He felt he could ask her anything at all and she'd be pleased at anything he might ask. He passed a hand over her breasts.

'You've a very fine cloth.'

'Yes,' she said proudly, 'it's a tiger-skin, the most expensive in the market.'

'Nanya, do you live far from here?'

'No, I've a little room next to my family.'

'Shall we go there? I'll buy rum, and we can drink it in your room.'

'Yes.' She lowered her eyes. 'But I like gin better.'

'Boy! A bottle of gin.'

She walked out in front of him. He collected the bottle, and the sailor waved at him, giving him another beaming smile. 'She's a ... very ... very ... nice girl.'

She was waiting for him at the door. It was still raining, but the storm was past. She took his hand and guided him to where she lived. They entered a small yard, she got out a key and opened the door. Then she asked him for matches and lit a small paraffin lamp. There was a mattress on the ground, an enamel basin in the corner, a jug of water and two suitcases. She chased away a small lizard, which was blinded by the lamp, and laughed. 'I've no glass.'

'That's all right,' said Luc, and drank from the bottle.

She got a towel and wiped her shoulders, then removed her soaking cloth, took off her sandals, and sat down on the mattress. She was completely naked, except for three rows of blue beads round her waist.

'What sort of a belt is that?'

'It's for babies.'

'You've got children?'

She laughed, then drank a little gin. 'No, it's to stop having babies.'

'Be careful, Nanya . . .'

'With this belt, I'm not afraid of anything.' She lay on her back, and smiled as she watched him undress.

She had very coarse hair, cool smooth fresh skin, soft lips; and the smell of carob-trees in autumn wafted over her body.

Afterwards she rested her head on his shoulder, and Luc put his hand on her heart. Then he knew complete peace, until he realised she was going to sleep.

'Nanya . . . I must go back.'

He got dressed quickly in the gleam of the lamp, which threw its shadow on to the walls.

'You're forgetting your gin,' said Nanya, smiling. She had propped herself on her elbow, and now watched him preparing to leave.

'No, it's for you . . . Nanya, is there anything you'd like?'

'If you come back,' the girl replied, 'if you come back one day, I'd like a new suitcase. If you don't come back—it doesn't matter. You're a very kind white man.'

He opened the door, and went out. The rain had stopped, but on both sides of the roads muddy water was flowing into brimming drains, and on his way back to the hotel he had to jump across puddles. A door that someone had opened to let in the night air brought to his ears the sound of a gramophone grinding out some old jazz record. In a hoarse fruity voice, the singer told of a man's terrible pain when he has lost his freedom. It was the ageless music of the Africans, which behind the façade of daily life seeks a chance to speak to the heart, since that alone is important.

He went quietly into their room at the hotel. Hermann was asleep.

* * *

The road was of red clay, so the tyres slithered at each bend. They drove for hours beneath a stifling arch of tall trees, and

at last reached the green hills of the gold-mining country. Beneath an overcast sky, steely-grey in the mist, they came to a river with murky water, which they crossed by a small ferry; and beyond it lay the village of Prestea, set amidst green lawns and gutted hills, where only kapok trees had survived massacre by the great engines. They saw a railway line, bungalows nestling in the greenery, and above these a thin network of wire running between the steel pylons, with tip-trucks hanging in the air, carrying their ore towards the central factory. This was indeed the centre of the spider's web suspended between heaven and earth. With a distant roar from its steam-pulverisers it swallowed the earth and rock rich in gold-dust; laboriously it digested the ore which men in steel helmets and leather caps were tearing out of the bottomless shafts; air from the blue sky reached it by gigantic ventilating pumps, which never for a moment stopped their muffled breathing. The chimneys smoked day and night, submerging the great slag-heaps in low heavy clouds, that were pierced every eight hours by a jet of steam from the hooters: with a wail of anguish which had long chased all the animals from the nearby forest, they told the men below that men from above were descending to relieve them.

The men of the day-shift came up, taking off their goggles to wipe their eyes, trying to get rid of the mask of dust which covered them. Their torn singlets and shorts—or greasy trousers, held up by thick wide leather belts—were caked with the yellow mud from the depths of the earth. They formed up quietly in single file to be searched by the guards; then came out of the iron gates and collected in cheerful groups to go down to the village.

Hermann stopped, and examined all the miners as they went by, talking in their native tongues. You could hear Moshi and Dagomba from the north, and Lam saw Fulani, though—knowing their suspicious reserve—he let them pass without saying anything to them. Four Hausas passed, and

Adamu said it was certainly the first time he had seen Hausas doing any other work but trade. Suddenly Duma dashed out of the truck shouting 'Usmani! Hi, Usmani! Usmani!'

The Songhai he had called turned round, parting his teeth in a flashing smile. The man he was with also turned.

'What are you doing here, Usmani? Look, Ramana, it's Usmani, he lives at Ayoru. His hut is just by mine. And who's your friend, Usmani?'

'I'm Alzuma, my village is Gothey,' said the other Songhai.

Adamu and Tahiru got out of the truck, and they all greeted each other laughing; then the two Africans shook hands with Hermann and Luc.

'You know where we can eat and sleep?' asked Adamu.

'Just by our place, there's a mammy who lets a house. Come along.'

They climbed on the running-board and guided Hermann towards the village.

'You haven't seen a man from Firgun called Issufu?' asked Luc. Hermann stared at the two Songhais, and all the boys stopped talking.

'Issufu, son of Umaru—of course,' said Usmani.

'He's here?' Hermann demanded tensely.

'No, He's gone. He left about five days ago, perhaps six.'

'Do you know where he's gone?'

'No. But I know Issufu. He may be at Accra, or at Takoradi—Issufu prefers towns.'

Luc turned to look at Hermann, but he had taken the blow without flinching, and went on talking to the Songhais in the same tone.

The foreign quarter was on both sides of a wide track. It consisted of the same mud-huts, with roofs of thatch or corrugated iron, as they had found everywhere since arriving in the Gold Coast.

'There are about five thousand of us living here,' said

Alzuma. 'There's a new village the mining company have built for us, but nobody wants to live there, because here we have the local mummies to look after us and see we eat all right.'

'And they eat our pay all right,' said Usmani, laughing.

Hermann saw the 'mammy', a huge smiling matron wearing a gaudy cloth that carried a portrait of Queen Elizabeth and the Duke of Edinburgh—whose faces were strangely contorted when the mammy bent down to stir her fire. For seven shillings she promised a room and 'the best food in the world for the white men's boys'.

The Africans came part of the way towards the camp with Hermann and Luc.

'You see that,' said Tahiru to Luc. His eyes were shining, and his finger pointed to a small lighted window in the factory. 'That's the house of gold. Usmani told me. That's where the bars of gold are made. There are only white men there. They all watch each other, and they all have a pistol in their pockets. When there's a good load of gold, they put it on the train with guards, guns loaded. Nobody goes near. You see, Lussu, with a big magic charm, a very big one, you could get all that gold!'

'That's no hunt for a Gow, Tahiru.'

'In Kurmi all hunts are allowed. Why, the Ashanti even hunt men.'

'They catch them and kill them?' asked Luc.

'Dyam! That's all that counts for the Ashanti: killing men to honour their ancestors. They take a lot of care over these ancestors, they even give them food and drink. Oh, the Ashanti are dangerous people . . .' His face grew very serious at the thought of the cruel, suspicious little men killing strangers by night to honour their own dead of royal blood.

After a while the Africans wished Hermann and Luc a night without mosquitoes, and went back to the mammy for dinner.

'What terrible luck!' said Luc, when they were alone.

'Oh, it's not so bad, we're hot on the trail now. Issufu only left four or five days ago, so he no longer has much start on us.'

'We know he prefers towns to the bush, but towns are big places.'

'Still, this is our first real clue for days and days. If only we knew what job Issufu had chosen on the Gold Coast—that would make things much easier.'

'He seems to get around a lot,' said Luc, 'and Mukaila looked very embarrassed about him. I don't think he told us all he knew about Issufu.'

'No, I felt that, too. I felt he wanted to help us, or he wouldn't have mentioned that Issufu had become one of the spirit-horses; but there was something he was keeping secret.'

'What are you planning for tomorrow?'

'I don't really know. We'll discuss things with the boys. Perhaps return to Takoradi, or perhaps go to Kumasi.'

They slept in a remarkable rest-house which was more like the club-house of an English golf-club than an African house. With a perfectly trained boy to look after them, they had a refrigerator, radio, mosquito nets, spring mattress, and a discreet call in the morning with 'Orange-juice, gentlemen,' followed by a gargantuan breakfast and a hot shower. After this they went down to the foreign quarter to find the boys.

'Come in,' said Lam in an anxious voice. 'A lot happened last night.'

In the half-light of the hut they saw Adamu and Tahiru stretched out on their mats, talking in low voices. Duma was sitting on the floor, holding a man down by means of a cord round his neck. The man lay prone, with his hands and feet bound.

'Who's this?' asked Hermann.

'Shh!' Adamu put his finger to his lips.

'The hunt has begun,' said Tahiru quietly.

'We're going to cut his throat,' said Duma, with a pleasant smile towards the man on the floor, who started trembling violently.

'Sit down,' Adamu told the white men, 'and we'll tell you about the battle of the thief-men. Yesterday evening we have our dinner. A very good dinner, this mammy gives us plenty, and no one goes hungry. The night comes, we talk a bit, then we go to bed. But Tahiru'—he pointed to the mat nearest the wall—'Tahiru doesn't sleep.'

'It's the wall,' Tahiru explained. 'The air comes in below, my nose is cold, and it makes me think of Accra. The air came in at Accra, and the thief-men took Adamu's box. So I tie my roll to one foot with my belt, and I keep my eyes on the wall. I wait for about an hour, and am just going off to sleep, when I see a hand come in. Without a sound. A hand that feels around. And an arm behind it. Who's this? I ask myself, and catch the hand and pull . . .'

'What a noise!' put in Lam. 'Tahiru pulls so hard, a small piece of this man's arm gets cut on the corrugated iron.'

'Tahiru calls me: Adamu, Adamu, get up and catch this thief-man. So I wake Duma, we take the rope . . .'

'And bang!' cried Duma, thrusting his fist in the air. 'I hit him on the head and he stops moving. We tie him up. We look round. No one sees us. So we bring the thief-man into the house. Softly, softly. We lay him down here and I hold on to him.'

'While I go out,' Adamu resumed. 'I look everywhere to see if this man has friends waiting for him. I see nothing, I come back, and since then we've been waiting for you.'

'And now I'm cutting his throat,' said Duma, looking at the man and rubbing his neck with the side of his hand.

'I don't think we ought to kill him yet,' said Lam. 'Remember Baraki's words: the thief-men are against you, but you must work with the thief-men if you want to find Issufu.'

'Lam's right,' said Hermann. 'We must talk to this man.'

They leaned him against the wall and spoke to him in Hausa. The man was still trembling, and his squashed-out features expressed extreme fear. He was thin, with very fuzzy hair, and had nothing on but a piece of blue cloth. A deep gash made by the corrugated iron on his right shoulder showed that he had struggled hard before letting himself be overcome. He wore a little leather bag and a stone bracelet above the elbow of his left arm.

'If you don't answer at once, look out!' threatened Duma, approaching the prisoner with his matchet.

'I'm a Dagomba from the north,' said the man. 'Don't kill me.'

'You know now that our charms are stronger than yours,' said Tahiru, negligently tapping the man's leather bag.

'Yes. Yes. I know. You are strong.'

'You steal all by yourself?'

'Yes. No one helps me.'

'You have a chief who gives you orders?'

'Yes. The chief of the thief-men.'

'There's a chief of the thief-men at Prestea?'

'Yes. He's a Hausa.'

'We'd like to see him,' said Hermann. 'You can take us to him?'

'No,' said the man after a moment's hesitation.

'Look out,' said Duma, raising his knife.

'Stop, oh stop! Yes, I can take you.'

'Pick him up and put him in the truck, Duma,' said Hermann. 'You can all collect your things, we're leaving.'

'And you're going to kill me afterwards?' asked the prisoner with a new fit of trembling.

'I don't know,' Hermann answered. 'If you've lied certainly. If not, I don't know. Tell me, has every town in this country got a chief of the thief-men?'

'Yes,' said the man, as Duma picked him up like a feather to carry him to the truck.

'Come on, we must hurry.'

They hid the prisoner under the tarpaulin, leaving his head out so that he could guide them. He told them to stop near a small courtyard of beaten earth, adjoining a tiny store. 'Here it is.'

They went into the yard, and a Hausa merchant, pot-bellied and smiling, with small piggy eyes, greeted them cheerfully.

'Here you are,' said Hermann. 'One of your men coming back.'

'Coming back without luggage,' said Tahiru, giving the prisoner a kick. 'Because his luggage belongs to other people.'

'Who is this man, and what do you want?' said the merchant, pretending to be utterly bewildered.

'You don't know him?' Hermann turned away from the prisoner, who was keeping very quiet, and seized the merchant violently by the collar. 'If you don't know *him*, he knows *you*. I'll tell you what I want: either you answer my questions or else I leave two men here on guard and go off for the police. Your store will be searched, and I'm sure they'll find some very interesting things. So make up your mind, and quickly too.'

The merchant went pale. 'Come in,' he said, leading them into his store. As they went past, Tahiru gave him a punch in the stomach. 'Dyam,' he exclaimed, 'you must *eat* the luggage you steal.'

Soon they were all seated, squashed tight together. The prisoner, still tied up, lay at their feet. Hermann looked the merchant in the eyes.

'I'm trying to find a friend of mine. A Songhai like all of these. His name is Issufu. I have to find him. I will give you ten days. You will tell the chief of the thief-men in every town, and they are to tell me if they see Issufu. If you haven't any news of Issufu in ten days, I shall inform the police. During the ten days we shall stay here in your house

to keep watch on your store, and this man will remain our prisoner.'

'And you'll have to feed us,' added Adamu.

The merchant burst out laughing. 'Issufu, son of Umaru! He's your friend, and you tie this man up. And you talk of bringing the police. Don't you know what work that Songhai does?'

'No. Tell us, if you know.'

'Issufu is a thief-man, a thief-man just like the man here. But Issufu has good charms and no one can catch him.'

Hermann turned to Luc in amazement; the boys too were thunderstruck.

'There's a mystery solved, eh, Adamu?'

'Dyam!' cried Adamu. 'Issufu stealing. That's a great secret we've had revealed.'

'Mukaila, the chief of the Haukas, must have known this,' said Luc.

'Yes,' agreed Lam, 'but it was a great secret, so he couldn't tell.'

'Right,' said Hermann, laughing, and clapped the Hausa merchant on the shoulder. 'Your affairs are working out well. Now tell us where he is.'

'Just wait,' said the merchant, 'I'll chuck this wretched little thief-man out.' He took the prisoner by the arms, picked him up, and gave him a shove so that he went tumbling into the court-yard. 'Clear off, and don't ever let me see you again.'

He came waddling back to the Europeans. He was enjoying the sense of power; his eyes had become cruel, and he had stopped smiling.

'Issufu is at Kumasi. He tried to steal gold here, but it's too difficult. His charm is not strong enough, and then, as he's a day-time thief-man—the work here is more for night-time thief-men—he preferred to go off and steal in the big markets. That's why Issufu is at Kumasi.'

'So I must see the chief of the thief-men at Kumasi.'

'Yes,' said the merchant gravely. 'I'll tell you his name and where he lives. But it's a secret you will have to forget as soon as you have found your Issufu. Otherwise the thieves won't forget you.' He bent over Hermann's shoulder and whispered something in his ear.

'Thanks,' said Hermann. 'I have this moment forgotten *you*, and I shall forget what you've told me just as quickly.' He made his way to the door with Luc.

'Oh dear,' exclaimed Adamu, 'the prisoner has gone off with my rope. Look, there's a rope lying there—I'll take that, and we'll be quits.' He untied a very big ship's cable, and put it on his head.

'That thief-man made me lose my torch,' said Duma, who had never owned one. He picked up a long nickel-plated torch from a shelf in the store.

'He tore my *bubu*,' said Tahiru, putting half a dozen gaudy cloths under his arm.

'Your store is a good one,' said Lam, not venturing to take anything. 'There are fine things in it, and they're not expensive.'

They went out by the little door, looking mockingly at the big Hausa merchant. After unloading their booty, they got into the truck, and Hermann drove off on the main Kumasi road.

They travelled all day amidst humid forests, where the tall trees were interspersed with cocoa plantations distinguishable by a sudden yellow or brown in the colour of the foliage. Crazy trucks, loaded with logs, kept hurtling past them, and Duma hid his head in a cloth to avoid further sight of this death-race. Little Lam had an attack of fever, and became delirious. Hermann made him take quinine; Tahiru put Lam's head on his knee, and gave him continual drinks. The strain of the journey and the climate had begun to tell. The shirts stuck to their backs, and they were never rid of the steamy bluish coastal mist. Towards evening they were overtaken by warm rain, when they were

quite near Kumasi; the last few miles were difficult on a road glistening with rain, in a fog too thick for the headlights to penetrate. Tahiru guided them through the suburbs, they passed a power station, went through a silent township built on the hills; then descended into the noisier districts along by the market, to come out on a mud track washed by torrents of red water.

Tahiru tried to find the house of the chief of the Songhais. At last he signalled to Hermann to pull up outside a tailor's shop, and hammered on the door as hard as he could, shouting in Songhai.

'Hey, gently there, you ox, you'll break the door down!'

The man who had just spoken came out of a small yard separating the shop from another more spacious building. A slim man with a very straight nose, he wore a Sorko blue cotton cap, a large white *bubu*, and northern-type sandals, wide and flat.

'How have you come to the way?' said Tahiru.

'For good.'

'How have you come to the bush?'

'In peace.'

'How have you come to the evening?'

'In peace and health.'

'Bonjour, chief,' said Hermann. 'We're all from Songhai country, and we're looking for food and lodging.'

'Dyam! You *are* lucky,' said the chief. 'I was putting up some people from Gao, and they left this morning. I can sleep in my shop, and leave you the yard for your truck and to do your cooking; and you can all sleep in that little house.' He pointed to the hut of dried mud and corrugated iron which adjoined the yard. 'The door can be bolted,' he added.

'There aren't any holes under the walls?' asked Adamu.

'No, there are no holes under the walls. I've blocked up those walls thoroughly and I look every morning to make sure no thief-man has tried to break through in the night.'

'Ah, then we can sleep peacefully,' said Adamu, 'without tying our boxes to our feet.'

They got Lam out of the truck and at once put him to bed, with Duma as night-nurse. Tahiru and Adamu erected the white-men's camp-beds in the other room, and after sweeping round a bit, set up the little table and two chairs also. They then emptied the truck and installed themselves in their new home. Tahiru was happy; for him the journey was over. 'I'll sell my skins and medicines,' he told Luc, 'and I've already got six fine cloths for my wife.'

Then they went to have a talk with their new friend, Abdu Gao, tailor and chief of the men from the North. They told him about their journey, for there was nothing to hide from this Songhai. He had already heard of Hermann, and declared himself ready to do anything he could to help them find Issufu.

'I don't know him, he said, 'but if your Issufu has got a Hauka spirit, he should be at the Haukas' festival next Sunday. It takes place in the afternoon, in the Bantama quarter. I'll give you a message for the chief of the spirits, a woman called Zumo. She's a very nice woman, and a good friend of mine. Anyhow, Europeans are always friends with the Haukas, because the Haukas are white spirits.'

'Yes,' said Hermann, 'but they are not stronger than Dongo.'

'Not in the bush, certainly, but in the towns . . .' Abdu Gao scratched his head without going on, to indicate that he had not yet settled this important question.

Tahiru asked him if there were many men from the north at Kumasi this year. The chief gave his opinion that there were more than other years for two reasons: first, the journey was a very long one on foot, and it was much easier now they had trucks to take them; and secondly there had been serious trouble at the market last year. The Hausas and Ashanti, not liking the business success enjoyed by the people of the north, demanded their removal from

the central market to the market of the Bantama quarter in the suburbs. The British acceded to their request, pressed by the chief of the foreign workers, who was a Hausa; and violent fights followed. The men from the north took their sabres and stormed the central market, overturning the stalls, thrashing the Ashanti, and cutting off the heads of three Hausa merchants. The affair had not yet been settled, and the people from the north had asked urgently for reinforcements from their country, preparing for the risks of a possible coalition against them.

'Well,' said Hermann, 'it's the first time I've seen the people of Gao, united as the fingers of one hand, acting for a common purpose.'

It was a traditional Songhai jibe at the people of Gao, who never manage to agree among themselves. The chief laughed, and then said: 'You're wrong, you know; even now there's big trouble among the people of Gao. A false chief called Duga is stirring up trouble among them, and at present I, the real chief, have to stop my boys killing him and throwing him in the river.'

'And you don't think Issufu can have seen Duga?' Luc enquired.

'No, because Duga's secretary is my nephew. Duga doesn't know anything about that, while I know all he does and who he sees.'

'You're very strong,' said Adamu. 'It's not for nothing you have a Sorko cap on your head.'

'My father was a priest of the spirits, and by my mother I drank the milk of Si.'

'Ah,' said Hermann, 'and we know the sons of the vulture will always fly higher than the rest.'

The chief was duly flattered. They took their leave of him and went off to bed.

* * *

Hermann and Luc surveyed the town. Below them lay a sea of rusty roofs, which stopped short at the foot of a hill; on

the hill was a mass of grey stone spiring upwards like a cathedral. Vultures whirled above their heads in immense flights, piercing the sky with cries which made them think nostalgically of the tree at Wanzerbi. They felt the tide of fortune had turned, for now they were indeed on Issufu's track; but their new luck had to be paid for. Lam still had fever, and Duma kept up a ceaseless coughing all night. Hermann made plans accordingly: Adamu would stay behind to nurse the patients, while Luc and Tahiru began searching in the central market, and he himself went off—alone, as promised—to see the chief of the thief-men.

Walking down to the market with Tahiru, Luc realised he had so far not seen a single European. At Takoradi and in parts of Accra you saw them often, whereas here the town seemed exclusively inhabited by Africans. So this was Kumasi. He heard in memory the lilt in their voices when the men from the north talked of Kumasi: talked of their old dream of cloths and money, of the hard-won Golden Fleece which made the young men of the river so proud when it was said of them: 'He's a son of Kurmi, he's been to Kumasi.'

Along alleys of beaten earth, the little shops, covered with tarpaulins or corrugated iron, stretched for miles and miles with their stalls so intoxicating to the men from the north. All the black races mingled side by side, and there were people talking in all languages. Massive women called out the various foods they were offering; porters yelled for room to pass with their hand-carts, full of yams, bales of cloth or military uniforms. The crowd was parted for a moment, to join up again as soon as the carts were through: a crowd fluid as water or sand, which wound its way forward with much shouting, sudden stops, clashing colours; a stream of life fed from the rough sap of all Africa's jungles and bush. And over it all wafted a sweetish musky smell, from great heaps of wool left by the sheep-shearing, a smell only endurable for those who love the black races.

Luc stopped near an Ashanti woman selling cloths, and while Tahiru looked at them with shining eyes, Luc felt each piece. The woman told him what each was called in a far-away, sing-song voice: 'The mango country,' 'The big tulip,' 'The spider,' 'The spirits' daughter,' 'The gramophone record,' 'The shoot of cassava,' 'Kiss me my love,' 'The flower of Koforidua,' 'The queen-mother's fan,' 'You can't eat on sixpence,' 'Life is full of things.' Then he and Tahiru went on their way amidst piles of pink soap, towels and pilchards; tins telling of mysterious soups, unfamiliar vegetables and strange sauces; enamel basins, beer-mugs, Hercules bicycles, silver-plated torches, American blankets and airmen's kit; among mountains of hats made of felt, canvas or cork, where the whole world's headgear seemed represented; plaster virgins and copper scales; shapeless shoes and faded trousers; until at last Tahiru said: 'Here's the stock-market. When the sheep are there, the people from the north aren't far away.'

He exchanged greetings with merchants in blue *bubus*, who also greeted Luc happily, for they knew two Europeans coming from their country had arrived in Kumasi. A man from Dori told him they hadn't seen Issufu, but would send word at once to the chief's house if any of them did. 'But it's not worth your wasting your time in the big market,' the man from Dori went on, 'you can count on all of us.' Then he turned to the other owners of the sheep and cattle, men who had come down from the north to sell their stock at the Kumasi market, and appealed to them to 'find this Issufu quick-quick, so that afterwards the white men here will come back and drink a calabash of sour milk with us as a sign of friendship.' They all nodded, and shook hands, and Tahiru swapped news with them; then Luc and Tahiru returned to Abdu Gao's house.

Hermann was waiting for them. He took Luc aside, and described his own morning: 'I saw the chief of the thief-men. He's a Syrian, drives an American car, and traffics chiefly



in diamonds and gold, but he has a sort of side-line working with petty thief-men like Issufu. He buys absolutely everything at a tenth of its value, and pays cash down. He's going to keep a special look-out for Issufu, and he must have heaps of contacts. He was pretty optimistic; in fact when he left me, he said: "Don't worry. Give me a week, and we'll find him."'

'I've got no news,' said Luc. 'I told the Songhais at the market, the chief here has told others. Everyone's looking, so all we can do is wait.'

They waited four days. Tahiru sold his skins and medicines. Lam recovered, but Duma was still very weak. He had been seriously ill and Hermann had him seen by an African doctor, who ordered a course of penicillin. Although getting better, he still needed careful treatment. Adamu gave the injections, and was very proud his nursing talents should be recognised: but every day he visited all the Songhais in Kumasi, though without securing any real clue.

The chief was extremely friendly, putting himself out for his guests regardless of expense or trouble. When he saw Lam and Duma in bad health, he lent the party a girl from his family to look after the cooking. The boys were pleased, and Hermann congratulated himself on the choice of this house, in which the sons of the river need not feel too strange. He had seen many men from the north since arriving in the Gold Coast, and realised that they could not get used to this country, its climate and inhabitants. They came simply to make money, and when that object was achieved, returned happily to the hard life of the bush, the hospitality of their brothers and the fierce heat of their sun.

One evening Hermann returned from the post and handed Luc a bunch of letters. Taking them in his moist hands, Luc went off to read them in the cool shade of his room.

In these letters Hélène's life was unfolded like one of those films where the sound-track has broken down and the actors

are left mouthing in complete silence. The succession of small actions, the whole world she evoked, the remote passion which possessed her—Luc found it all like evidence from some lost planet. 'I took the bus,' she wrote, and he caught himself passing judgement on the images evoked by that word: the filthy eight-o'clock bus; faces puffy with sleep, grim, pale faces; a dirty tie pulled up like a piece of knotted string; a day of snow, a man in a grimy shirt, much-darned woollen socks and summer sandals; he wipes his nose, his hand disappears in his coat; a large woman treads on his toes, and does it again as she gets out, content to have punished him for taking too much room.

No, thought Luc, I couldn't live again in that country where men and women never smile. He saw this conviction swelling in his heart, giving birth to a desperate pity. The game's too hard, I can't go on pouring out these empty words simply to console her. He thought it over for a night, his spirit oppressed by the knowledge that something had died within him. The next day he wrote to her as if nothing had changed, implying that she could expect him back at the end of the dry season. When the letter had gone, he knew he had been cowardly or worse; also that he had failed to believe in Hermann and their hunt. He remained rather withdrawn, until Hermann took him off drinking. He drank so much that he passed out; on waking the next morning he felt his soul had been cleansed. For several weeks now the tracks had been confused, but now he had taken a great step forward on the right path. Unconsciously, he had caught the habit of pruning away all inessentials; his heart was full of the hunt and the distant promise of victory.

* * *

Duma went out that morning. He had recovered his appetite, and patted his stomach cheerfully. 'I eat a little, and whoosh, I get back my strength!'

Hermann, who had been visiting the chief of the thief-men,

returned before lunch with good news. 'A stolen bicycle was bought in the Asawassi district. I hope it's our man who sold it. The thief-men are on Issufu's track, and as soon as he knew he wasn't in danger, the man who bought the bicycle was ready to say who'd sold it.'

'Soon the net will be cast, and a large fish caught,' declared Adamu.

'I'd like to say something,' Lam put in.

'Say on, we're all listening.'

'You're forgetting Baraki's words. Baraki said: you must attend all the devils' dances. The devils will help you. So this afternoon we ought to see the Haukas of the Bantama district. They may be willing to talk to us.'

'Lam's right,' said Luc. 'Let's split up. Hermann and Adamu can search in Asawassi, while I and the others will go to Bantama.'

'Don't let's separate,' said Adamu. 'I can trust the thief-men anyhow, so let's all go to see the Haukas.'

'The majority has decided. We all go to the Haukas.'

They ate their lunch quickly, then got in the truck and made for Bantama. The sun was shining for the first time for days, and the vultures flew low. These signs were interpreted as the promise of the spirits' aid. 'The vultures are telling us that Issufu isn't far away,' Adamu expressed it.

In the centre of the small houses of Bantama there was a sunny square dominated by a large tree. At least a thousand Africans, mostly Songhais, were crowded round a band composed of two fiddlers and three drummers on gourds. Hermann, Luc and the boys pushed their way up to the musicians, and were greeted with great acclamation by Africans from Ayoru, Niamey and Tilaberi, many of whom seemed to know Herman and his companions. Abdu Gao was waiting for them near the musicians. 'I preferred to come here myself,' he said, 'to present you to my old friend.'

He introduced Zumo to them, a woman of about fifty in a red cloth; she was slim and straight as a candle, with

cracked feet and delicate ankles. She shook hands with them in a very friendly way, saying: 'Abdu told me you were looking for me. I don't know the man you want, but if he hears the music of the Haukas, he is bound to come out of the ranks and dance with the other spirit-horses.'

'We have seen Mukaila,' Hermann told her. 'The dances are suspended at Accra, but they'll be starting again soon.'

'I know,' Zumo answered sadly. 'The spirits killed one of their horses. That horse was bad . . . I like Mukaila very much, he's a man you can trust. If you pass Accra again, please greet him and tell him that one of my fiddlers will soon be returning to his home at Niamey. So if he can, Mukaila should send me another fiddler.'

'If we pass Accra again, your commission will be carried out.'

They sat down near the musicians. The Niamey fiddler knew Adamu and Duma, and greeted them, showing them his one-stringed fiddle and mentioning that he had to change the string very often here because of the damp. Then he scratched his ear with his bent wooden bow and began to play the tune of the Haukas while singing their chants—which Zumo repeated in a shrill voice. The gourd-beaters picked up their drum-sticks of five branches, and joined in, squatting on their knees. The music, at first thin and wheezy, began to swell; at which the crowd quietened down a bit. It consisted mostly of young people, wearing new fezzes, new cloth caps or gaudy woollen berets. Some had brand-new, flowing *bubus*, and others blue or khaki trousers. T-shirts or sailors' jerseys. For these men only the colour really counted, and there was a splendid motley of blinding reds, lollipop pinks, priestly purples and acid greens. Then a man darted out from the middle of the crowd, and began to repeat the same steps, his eyes on the ground, whirling around on the space left free in front of the musicians. The rhythm of the music began throbbing, and the fiddlers repeated the same theme, but before it reached that climax which it seemed to

be heralding, the drummers dashed their sticks on to the backs of the gourds, taking up the beginning of the theme all over again.

By now other spirit-horses had come out of the ranks, and were whirling slowly round, forming a circle which kept on growing with the addition of new dancers. The music flared up, only the fiddles were playing, and the dancers' step grew faster. They danced for an hour, perhaps two—time had ceased to exist, and only the sun, now going down, told the men that the time for their possession by spirits was near. For some time now the musicians had been playing the private tunes of each Hauka spirit, while the fiddlers also sang the spirit's chant. Then a man came out of the circle, howling and foaming at the mouth, and began to run, imitating the noise of a truck: he was possessed by Mymota, the driver's spirit.

He ran round the others as hard as he could go. Stopping suddenly in front of the musicians and pulling an imaginary brake, he addressed Zumo and the white men: 'Mymota. The chief of the motor! The power of the motor!'

Whitish froth came from his mouth, staining his jersey.

'Mymota never breaks down in the bush! Give petrol to Mymota! Mymota, the driver with no breakdowns drinks petrol!'

Zumo brought a small bottle of petrol out of a leather bag, and handed it to the man. He drained the petrol at one go, then began foaming at the mouth again, at the same time fixing the white men with a terrible stare. 'Mymota who never has a breakdown! Mymota the best of drivers! Mymota the power of the motor!' . . . he returned to the mad race.

After his paroxysm was reached, further possession by spirits took place very quickly. A good dozen Hauka spirits descended on to the dancers' heads. Zuma gave a white coat to a tall African who had earlier greeted Adamu and was now possessed by the doctor's spirit. He took the arms

of the others, giving them imaginary injections and shouting: 'Don't move! The vaccine! Lokotoro is pricking you! Lokotoro is nursing you! Don't run away, you shower! Lokotoro is pricking you, Lokotoro is nursing you!'

This man had the screeching voice of all the Haukas, but spoke mostly in French. A little farther on a man was drilling another Hauka. These were Yotanan and Caprane Gardi, *le lieutenant* and *le caporal de garde*.

'God almighty! Damn your eyes! God almighty! Damn your eyes. Atten-shun!' cried the lieutenant, and the corporal gave a little jump, with a piece of wood on his shoulder shaped like a rifle.

'Sloooooope—arms!'

The corporal now stood on his head. The lieutenant gave him a kick in the face. 'Stand at—ease! God almighty! Damn-and-blast! Damn your eyes!'

Another Hauka, Kwalanga, the colonel, watched them at it, himself drooling and yelling: 'Ah, you shower! You bastards! You shower!'

Istamboul, a Hauka spirit from the east, was talking in Arabic to Zeninder Malia, who ruled over the sea near Mecca and was chief of all the Haukas.

Meanwhile Kwalanga had firmly taken over the rifle drill, almost knocking the lieutenant out: 'Take aim. On your feet again. Stand at—ease. Atten—shun. Take aim. On your feet again. Dis—miss. You shower! You bastards! Dis—miss. Stand fast. Take aim. On your feet again. You shower!'

'Mymota drinks petrol. Mymota eats the wart-hog's head.' Mymota shoved out of his way Captain el Haji, captain of the Faithful, who was reciting a prayer in Arabic, his body turned towards the east. 'Aie! Aie! Aie! Fire, bring fire! Fire!' Mymota stopped before Zumo, demanding a torch.

He had both hands on his hips, and continued to foam at the mouth, leaning his head over at irregular intervals. 'That's Suley from Tilaberi,' exclaimed Duma, 'a friend of

mine.' The festival continued, with the spirit-horses, by now all possessed, whirling, drooling, shouting and interrupting each other, in that thin distant voice you hear in dreams. The master of the fire lit his torch and passed it over his face and chest, then thrust his hands in the flame, put the torch out in his mouth, and gave a long piercing deathly howl. Myaki, master of the stick, was thrashing everybody around him, but the spirit-horses seemed impervious to his blows till he struck Zuzi, the judge, right in the face. Zuzi fell to the ground, and then Zeninder Malia dealt with the master of the stick, raining ferocious punches on his face, which Myaki bore without blinking an eyelid.

'Uck . . . Uck . . . Uck . . . ' There was a sort of plaintive rattle coming from the middle of the crowd, who were massed behind the musicians. Zumo made people clear a space, and now the rattle came closer. A young man, foaming at the mouth, kicked his way through the crowd, and suddenly leapt out with his back to the white men. 'Uck . . . uck . . . uck . . . ' He crawled along the ground, then squatted on his knees, hands on hips, swinging his body to and fro. The master of the fire passed near him with another torch, then he rose and spat in the other's face. After that he turned round and moved towards the white men.

'Issufu!' cried Duma, his face turning grey.

'Issufu,' said Hermann, taking Luc's arm.

'Captain Mugu is the white men's friend,' said Issufu, in a voice that came from the back of his throat. He offered them an icy clenched fist, then shook their hands, digging his nails in.

'It's him—Issufu,' Hermann told Zumo.

'His spirit is a cruel captain, so watch out. Now he will strike the others.'

Captain Mugu dashed with a yell at Captain el Haji, stretched him out on the ground, and was now kicking him furiously.

'Ah, you shower! Damn and blast it all! I'm in charge

here. I'm the one in charge here. I'm the one to say what goes. What I say goes. Damn your eyes! Oh no, damn your eyes! No, blast it all! You'll all do what I say. I'm the one with the say here, you shower! Damn and blast your eyes!

Captain Mugu drew breath, while the fiddlers sang his chants.

'What are they saying?' Luc asked Adamu.

'*"Anta quama sama ana quana"*, that's Hausa for "Like the mosquito he gets up early"—because he plagues everybody's life like the real captain he is.'

'It's over,' said Hermann, 'the pursuit is over.' He gave a sigh of relief, and looked at Adamu with shining eyes. 'Adamu, wait till the end of his fit, and don't let go of him. Take Duma with you and stay near him. You understand, don't you?—you're not to let go of him till I've been able to talk to him.'

'Uck . . . uck . . . uck . . . ' said Captain Mugu, coming up to Luc with frothing mouth and rolling eyes. He took Luc's hand and said to him: 'The eyes saw, the feet went, the hands took—that's not stealing.' He straightened up and went over to Zumo. 'Who's in command here? Blast you! Give Captain Mugu scent. Who's in command here?'

Zumo gave him a small bottle of 'Sudan Beauty'. He tore the top off, drank half the bottle, and sprinkled the rest over him. For an instant he stayed there with hands on hips, moving his head to and fro; then he yelled, seized the corporal's wooden rifle, and struck Istamboul, who was staring skywards with the froth trickling from his lips.

'Power. Power. Who's in command here! Power, damn you! I've got power. So who's in command here, damn your eyes! Power, power. Hey, you, I'm white, aren't I? So just look out. Just you look out. I'm white. So I'm power, aren't I, by God, damn-your-eyes!'

'Does the festival go on much longer?' Luc asked Zumo.

'Who can tell?' she answered. 'Perhaps an hour, perhaps all night.'

'Zumo, where do the Hauka spirits come from?'

'If you want to know that, talk to the spirits. They'll talk to white men. Zeninder—these white men would like to talk to you.'

'Let them say what they wish,' said Zeninder. 'The Haukas talk to white men.'

'Where do the Haukas come from?' Luc asked again.

'They come from the east. The first spirit that came descended on the head of Shibbo, a woman from the village of Shekkal, in the district of Filingué. The spirit's name was Batura.'

'Thank you, Zeninder,' said Luc; and Zeninder shook hands with him.

'Now I can talk to you myself,' said Zumo, 'if you want to hear about the beginning of the Haukas.' She looked up towards the sky to work out the number of years that had passed, then crossed her arms and described the religion's origins:

'It was in the district of Filingué twenty years ago, at the end of the rainy season, when the millet was being cut. After Shibbo many others got spirits. A year passed, and the next winter the evil district officer, Corshushi, who was also called Captain Mugu, began to worry the people. Police came, they made a lot of fuss, and the Haukas were all summoned to Filingué. "Here, we're going to dance," said the Haukas. Then the police told them: "Won't you dance at Niamey too, because the captain has never seen the devils, never at all." The police were nice to them, and took them off to Niamey. They went on foot, they were well fed, and in the end they arrived at Niamey. They were brought to the race-course for the Bastille-day races. There were about two hundred of them, each one had his devil and they passed fire round. They ate the fire, then they broke sticks on their legs. The police surrounded them, and Corshushi said: "Come to my house, I want to talk to you." They went and sat down outside his door. "Where is the chief?" asked

Corshushi. Shibbo got up. He called her over and talked to her alone, he knew a little Hausa. Then he said: "Everyone back to work". Then he asked: "Did you bring the devils?" "No, the Lord God did," Shibbo answered. Then he told her: "I'll make you work, and when the devils are gone, you will tell me, and I'll let everyone go." Then they worked in the prison compound for a fortnight, and on the fifteenth day everyone was released, except Shibbo. She was kept in prison for a long long time. She lost her devil, came out of prison, and married a *marabout* from Timbuktu. She lived at Niamey, and spent her time praying. She died about four years ago. Her husband's name is Mulay, and if you mention the devils in his presence, he will only pray. Her devil was Batura, the white woman. Since then no one has got that devil. When the other Haukas came home, Mugu-Corshushi stopped bothering them. They got devils. They hid themselves. Later people got devils at Niamey, later they got them in Kurmi too. And there you are.'

Such was Zumo's story. It would never be collected in any bible, but somewhere in the bush or the towns, when the dancers' children's children were dead, there would always be an old man or woman to pass on the solemn trust to anyone who deserved it.

After a pause Hermann said to her, pointing at Issufu: 'Can you get hold of that man as soon as his spirit has left him? I'll leave two of my boys with you, Adamu and Duma, and I would like them to bring him to our house for a talk.'

'He will listen to me,' answered Zumo, 'you can go off now with your minds at rest.'

'I'll stay too,' said Abdu Gao. 'Don't worry, he will come to see you.'

They said goodbye to Zumo, tossed in the air a handful of shillings to provide perfume for the spirits, then carved a way with great difficulty through the solid mass of people.

When they were in the truck, Hermann drove off to the

chief of the thief-men to let him know the affair was settled; then they went home. They stayed up very late waiting for Issufu to come; but as there was no one in sight by two o'clock they went to bed, minds relaxed because their quest was over.

Adamu woke them very early, shaking them on the shoulder. 'Everyone's here and waiting for you. Issufu is a little tired, but looks forward to seeing you. I told him his father's words, and he answered: "Right, I'll come back."'

Hermann and Luc got dressed, and went out into the little courtyard. All their party were assembled. Issufu and Abdu Gao were engaged in animated conversation.

'No,' Issufu declared, 'I've not seen Duga the false chief. I haven't seen anyone here at Kumasi.'

'Then how did you find lodgings?'

'I lived with an Ashanti woman, at the far end of the Bantama district. A friend from Prestea had told me there was a room there. Why should I lie, Abdu Gao? I am strong enough to tell the truth.'

'Hullo,' said Hermann, looking him straight in the eyes. 'Hullo, Issufu, son of Umaru. Well, I left a little boy, and now I find a man.'

'A very strong man,' Issufu answered. 'Hullo, white men. Duma has talked to me. You're going to go on the hunt?'

'Yes.'

'And my father is asking for me?'

'Yes, your father is asking for you. Why—do you want to stay on here longer? Have you still work to do, money to make?'

'It's like this,' said Issufu, a little embarrassed. 'My pack is ready. I have made money. Right. I have presents. Right. But I still need some cloths for Adiza's family.'

'How much do you need for those?'

'Ten pounds perhaps.'

'Here's ten pounds for you,' said Hermann.

'Aha, my white friend, that's a present, is it? Right, then

here's my word: by noon I'll have bought what I need. At noon I can start on the journey home.'

'I made a promise,' said Hermann. 'I said there would be money if we found Issufu. So here's ten pounds for each of you. Ten for our friend Abdu Gao, also ten for Tahiru—and another ten for Issufu. There is my friendship and Lussu's.'

'Dyam!' cried Duma. 'Now I am really cured.'

'Fine cloths for my wives,' said Adamu.

'Yoy, yoy!' exclaimed Tahiru, laughing; but Lam only smiled quietly.

'Hey, Lam,' Luc asked him, 'what are *you* going to do with your money?'

The little Fulani lowered his eyes, and declared modestly: 'I'm going to buy kola-nuts and sell them at Niamey for five times the price.'

'Thank you, Ramana,' said Abdu Gao. 'And which day will you be leaving?'

'As soon as possible. Perhaps tonight, perhaps tomorrow.' He turned to Luc. 'I'm going to buy a gramophone, if you can get the records.'

'All right. Will you and Lam come with me, Issufu, to show me the best records?'

'Certainly,' said Issufu. 'I really know a lot about music.'

'He knows a lot about everything,' Lam muttered to Luc, with a sardonic look at Issufu.

First they went to the central market to buy the cloths. Then Lam hired a porter and loaded him with a sack of kola-nuts.

Luc considered Issufu. He was a slim young man of medium height, with small fine lips and the Songhai's delicate nose. He wore his blue *bubu* and fez carelessly, yet his whole appearance suggested nobility, and also a certain conceit, a nervous arrogance. This would burst out now and then, bringing a strange gleam into his black eyes. For all his assurance, he was somehow a disturbing personality.

'You spoke to me yesterday,' said Luc.

Lam turned and put a finger to his lips. 'Don't worry, Issufu, the white man is joking.'

'Yes,' said Luc, momentarily taken aback. 'Yes, I was joking.'

'Oh, good,' said Issufu. 'Because this morning was the first time I've seen you.' Suddenly he looked uneasy, regarded Luc's eyes, and smiled with relief. 'No, you're not a *tierkor*, you're not the little needle in the eye.'

'Here's something you know,' said Luc, returning to the attack. 'The eyes saw, the feet went, the hands took—that's not stealing.'

'Dyam!' said Issufu, stopping in his tracks.

'Aie, aie!' said Lam, staring at this rash white man, who would end up by causing a disaster.

'Oh, Lussu, you know that too! Where can you have heard it from?' Issufu touched Luc's arm, making sure he was not talking to a spirit.

'Yes, I know it,' said Luc: 'the spirits have spoken to me.'

'You know I'm a thief-man?'

'Yes.'

Lam had gone over to his porter and was no longer listening to them.

'You know you have just said the words of my magic charm?'

'Yes,' lied Luc.

'Then you're more powerful than I am,' said Issufu. 'What do you want?'

'You say these words when you're stealing?'

'Yes, I steal in broad daylight, and no one catches me.'

'Oh, that shows great power,' said Luc. 'But nobody has ever caught you?'

'Of course not. I become invisible.'

He gazed at the white man in surprise: apparently this Lussu did not believe him. 'Like me to show you?'

'Wow!' Luc could see himself being arrested and thrown in a cell. 'Oh well, if you like,' he said. 'But as far as

possible, I'd prefer to look as if we weren't together. *I'm not invisible.*'

'Listen carefully then. You go on with Lam to choose the records. I'll let you go into the shop, then I'll wait a bit, then I'll go in myself and steal.' He said it very simply, and without a trace of embarrassment. Luc felt cold shivers down his spine. 'All right,' he agreed, 'but don't say anything to Lam.'

'If that's how you want it. But, God Almighty, you shall see my power.' His eyes lit up with that gleam of conceit.

After a while they saw a shop with records and gramophones. 'Are you coming in, Lam? We can choose records here.'

'If I once leave the porter,' Lam answered, 'he'll run off with my kolas.'

'Wait,' said Issufu, and began to talk to the Ashanti porter in his own tongue. The porter turned pale, and sat down by the sack.

'There, that's dealt with him. So you can go in now. I'll wait for you.'

'Good,' said Lam, reassured. 'That's all right then.'

There were two young Ashanti in shorts and white shirts behind a very long counter. They were alone in the shop, and all round them the shelves were crammed with records.

'Play us the latest records please,' said Lam, 'the latest Hausa and Yoruba ones. They're the hits with us up north,' he added for Luc's benefit.

The assistants brought out some piles of records and put them down on the counter. Then they put one on the gramophone, and a banging of cymbals and gourds made Lam smile with pleasure. 'That's a good one, let's have that put on one side.'

They were at the third record when Luc saw Issufu framed in the doorway. He was very erect, and his eyes were glassy like the eyes of the possessed dancers. 'Aie!' exclaimed Lam in alarm.

'Don't move,' muttered Luc. 'You don't know him.'

Walking like an automaton, Issufu reached the counter. He took a pile of records under his arm, looked at the shop-assistant two yards away from him, and was back at the door with the same robot-like movements.

That's done it, thought Luc; now they'll shout, and he'll be arrested. Lam stood leaning against the counter. His knees were knocking together as he waited for the nightmare's end.

Issufu went out of the door. He had not once turned round, nor had anybody shouted.

'Put that on the side too,' said Luc, 'I like it very much.'

'O.K.' said the assistant. 'Now listen to this, it's the best band in Kano playing.'

They chose about twenty records altogether, paid for them, said good-morning to the shop assistants, and went out. 'Aie,' said Lam when they were outside. 'I've got a belly-ache, my inside's all turned over.'

Twenty yards from the shop, sitting by the porter, Issufu was waiting for them; his face now wore its normal expression.

'You must be mad to stay here,' said Lam nervously. 'You ought to have run away while you could.'

Issufu burst out laughing. 'If I run away, the charm is spoilt.' He stood up, put the records under his arm, and made a sign to the porter to follow them. 'Well, you white man, you saw my power?'

'Yes, I saw your power. You have a very good magic charm.'

'Let's get a move on,' said Lam, casting apprehensive glances over his shoulder. 'The rest'll be waiting for us.'

'These Fulani,' said Issufu scornfully, 'they're only good for walking behind oxen.'

Little Lam was incensed. 'The power we Fulani have comes from always taking good care over whatever we do.'

'I hope your charm won't work any more after you've left Kurmi,' said Luc.

'Oh no, it will never work for me again now.' For the last time Issufu looked at the great stores on Kumasi's streets. 'Now I'm a Sorko,' he said proudly, 'returning to my old profession, hunting.'

Six

EACH of the boys had his wooden box full of cloths. Duma had bought a Hercules bicycle with padlock, Hermann a gramophone and some cloths, Luc a bush-hat, some cloths and a small box of perfumes, and Tahiru an airman's uniform to be kept against the cold winters. The truck was full, and they began to get worried about the Customs.

'Look out,' Issufu warned them. 'We must leave by the north, otherwise the police will take half our things. In the north there are lots of little tracks they don't know. Those are the ones we must use.'

After saying good-bye to Abdu Gao and Zumo, they took the main road to Tamale, then branched off due east, going northwards again after Yendi.

It was one evening in the bush, when they were alone together, that Luc confessed to Hermann his fears about Issufu. Hermann nodded gravely, and answered: 'Yes, I'm very worried myself over the way he's turning out; and I know there'll be a showdown between us one of these days. He's capable of anything if you touch his vanity.'

Issufu had an immense belief in his own powers, and failed to adapt himself to the group's harmonious atmosphere. He despised Lam and Duma, and was continually annoying them; until one day Adamu reminded him that after all Lam was a chief in his own country, 'and Duma isn't *your* slave.' They nearly came to blows, but Tahiru calmed them down. There was nothing but trouble from Issufu, and Duma said sadly, 'Kurmi has changed him,' while Lam declared that he had 'a spoilt heart.' Tahiru, the

only one to defend him, kept saying: 'His spirit is an evil one, you can't blame Issufu himself.'

Contrary to what the white men had expected, Tahiru had never returned to his idea of staying on in the Gold Coast; he was coming back north with them as if that had been decided from the beginning. The hunter with the red eyes felt a special friendship for Luc, but it was a secret friendship, which Luc himself did not fully appreciate until a strange incident occurred with Issufu.

That morning they had passed Yendi, and were making for Yogu. Half way there they drove over a wooden bridge, below which a river flowed calm and limpid, with green trees shading its banks. 'It's the river Tanja,' said Hermann. 'How about a bathe?'

In a moment the dusty men had undressed, and were standing naked on fine sand at the edge of the clear water.

'Hey, Duma, want a fight?' cried Luc.

Duma accepted the challenge. He was strong but clumsy, and in two minutes Luc had sent him under. 'Wow! But the white man is strong,' panted Duma, as he emerged laughing from his ducking. 'He's strong enough to eat two black men.'

'I'd beat him,' said Issufu, unsmiling.

'You two fight then,' said Adamu.

They wrestled in silence for a while without either gaining much advantage. Then Issufu's knees began to tremble, and Luc saw a little froth on his lips. His eyes were glassy, his muscles contracted, and his skin suddenly went cold. Unnerved, Luc let go of him and retreated.

'His spirits have come to help him,' cried Lam in alarm.

Luc watched Issufu coming up—to give him a ferocious punch on the ear. Somewhat dazed, he tried to avert further blows, but received another hard one under the nose, which began to bleed, and he felt a bit of tooth chip off in his mouth. Issufu, or rather the spirit inside Issufu, was now tightening a grip on his neck. Luc bent his chin over his

chest to avoid being throttled, but for several seconds he lived in a vacuum. Then he suddenly remembered Baraki's words: 'Release the bush . . .' He tried to get a little air.

'Release the bush, Captain Mugu. Captain Mugu cannot fight a son of Si. By the vulture and the chain. Release the bush, Captain Mugu.'

'Uck . . . uck . . . uck . . .' came a hoarse voice—from the thing that was inside Issufu. 'Uck . . . uck . . . uck . . .' Luc felt the grip on his neck relax. He caught one of Issufu's arms, and held his adversary's ankle with one foot. Swinging him round, he felt the body go limp between his arms, and sent him rolling in the sand. 'Uck . . . uck . . . uck . . .' came once more from Issufu's mouth, together with a whitish foam, as he lay there unconscious: the thing had left him.

Tahiru took Luc in his arms. His face was grey, and he was trembling as he asked: 'Lussu—oh Lussu—you're not hurt?'

'Now the others were there too.'

'I'm all right,' said Luc. 'But I think he's hurt his knee.'

'You're a fool, Lussu,' Lam told him. 'You oughtn't to have fought with him, he was bound to call on his spirits.'

'If I'd known . . .'

'It's a good lesson for the fisherman,' said Hermann, and examined the leg. 'Yes, he *has* put his knee out. I think the ligaments are torn. Hold the top of his leg, boys.' He put the knee back in place.

'What's happened?' asked Issufu, who came round at this, his face twisted with pain.

'Nothing serious, Issufu. You were having a scrap, remember, and you fell. Your knee was put out when you fell, and you fainted.'

'Oh, I see,' said Issufu. 'Can you put a bandage on it?'

They dressed his knee with some oil and then bandaged it very tightly.

‘That’s better.’ He got up without a word more, limped over to the truck and climbed in.

That evening he was slightly feverish, so the party stayed in the bush and rested for two days. He remained a bit lame, but was less unco-operative. Tahiru took Hermann and Luc aside, and told them: ‘His spirit has been beaten, now it will leave him alone. And you needn’t be sad, Lussu—what you did had to be done. Now I can speak: I am pleased about this, because Baraki was afraid for you, and there was a secret between him and me. During this journey I was to look after you and keep watch over your life.’

‘So I was near to death?’ said Luc.

‘Perhaps you were,’ said Hermann. ‘Who can tell for sure, when the bush and the spirits are involved?’

After Yogu, Issufu guided them on to a bumpy laterite track. They forded a river, cut through the bush, and a few miles farther on rejoined the main road. ‘This is France,’ cried Issufu joyfully, ‘we’ve beaten the police.’

All the boys began yelling, and Duma composed on the spot a picturesque song in which the British police were dragged through the mud. Cheerfulness had returned, and they were all happy to have left the great stifling forest for the savannah. They were still a long way from the north, but the sun shone and the sky above them was clear as the sky at Firgun. They reached Sansanné-Mango on Christmas day and had Christmas dinner in the bush, gathering round a sheep that was roasted on the embers. Hermann opened the tins of cheese and Christmas pudding, uncorked a bottle of rum, and invited the party to partake of the contents. The Africans declined the rum because they were near their country and it was time to resume their old habits of sobriety. After that came a tricky road by Dapango, Tenkodogo and Fada N’Gurma. At the little village of Ugaru, Lam shyly asked, since they were ahead of schedule, whether the party would make a detour by Sy, so that he could see his family. Hermann agreed, and they slept that night at Diapaga.

On the track opening up ahead of them no vehicle had passed for two years. It was difficult, but the Dodge had seen worse. Twenty miles short of Sy, a bridge collapsed beneath it, and it remained miraculously suspended, supported by two struts which had met in the collapse and were holding the rear-axle. Tahiru went off into the bush with his bow and arrows, returning after two days with about fifty Africans whom he had found in a distant village. They worked for a week rebuilding the bridge, and Hermann gave them thousand-franc notes. They thanked him effusively and departed. Luc shot an antelope, and all gave thanks to Heaven, because for a week they had had no meat but guinea-fowl.

They reached Sy on the evening of a long day's journey, and all their hearts were stirred to hear the waters of the great river in the quiet of dusk.

After supper Lam went off to see his family. While the others were in bed, Hermann and Luc walked down to the bank of the river. For a long while they stayed leaning against the shea-trees, gazing silently into the dark waters where their destiny was to be played out. In the clear night you could not see where land ended and water began: there was a fringe of smooth sand and stagnant water which the night merged together, and it was only in the middle of the river that the current made the waters shine in the moonlight. An unknown canoe passed near them, and at that moment the thought of Hermann's death suddenly filled Luc's heart. He prayed that if death must soon come to his friend, it might be smooth and painless as the passage between the sand and the waters of the river.

The next day they headed for Niamey. As they waited for the old ferryman and his boat, the boys talked among themselves, discussing the surprises they had experienced on the journey.

"Those gold-mines!" said Adamu. "Gold must be very very expensive, seeing you have to sell your poor life to get it."

Duma rolled his big eyes and mentioned the thing that had struck him most: 'At Takoradi, I, Duma, saw a white donkey. That's really funny, a donkey that colour.'

'And I tell you what I saw,' recalled Lam, 'in the streets of Accra, those streets where you have to look hard right and left, in front and behind, if you don't want to be killed. In those streets I saw blind men lifting their white sticks and crossing in front of trucks, when they couldn't see anything. That was a real mystery to me.'

'And I saw an iron bow in one shop,' said Tahiru. 'It bent like wood.' His red eyes indicated extreme wonder.

'And I,' contributed Issufu, 'saw lots of things which I can't talk about—Oh, Kurmi is a great country!' He shook his head wistfully.

As soon as they got to Niamey, Adamu went to see his wives. He returned in the evening with a beaming face: two boys had been born. 'One would be good, but two—I really am lucky!' Then he put on three *bubus*, one over the other, a new fez and tennis shoes; and went parading through the town to tell his friends he was back.

For the first time since their meeting Issufu spoke of Adiza, his fiancée. Hermann told him that Ayissata approved of him, and Issufu asked the white men if he might leave them 'quick, quick, to go and get married, and so be sooner ready for the hunt.' His face was happy, he was burning to see Adiza again. Luc gave him gramophone records and the small box of scents, to share between his fiancée and Ayissata; Hermann gave him the gramophone 'to fight against the *griots*'; then they wished him good luck and arranged to meet him again at Firgun a few days later, after they had overhauled the truck and laid in provisions. Issufu thanked them very heartily; Duma and Lam went off with him to get the camp ready and see friends; Adamu stayed behind with his wives, whom he was delighted to see again after being away so long; as for Tahiru, he still wanted to savour the joys of a big town.

The Dodge's rear-axle had to be changed; it had been cracked at the bridge accident. A hard-drinking little Frenchman, who was wistful for Paris, worked four days and nights almost without a break to finish this job.

Meanwhile Hermann and Luc went for long lonely walks along the banks of the great river. The river filled their hearts; only the hunt could release them from their obsession. One morning the truck was ready, and they started off on the track for Gao, Adamu remarking to Tahiru: 'I leave my wives, because the hippos are expecting us. The dry season has come. Issufu will be married by now, so the hunt can begin.'

Tahiru left them at Tilaberi to cross the river and return to Wizebangu. They were all much moved as they said good-bye to him, and Luc said 'I'll do my best to come back and see you one day, if it's God's will.' 'He's a strong and honest man,' Adamu summed up afterwards. 'He knows the bush, and his heart is brave.' Then they forgot their friend and talked of the old giant till they reached Firgun.

They found the young Bellah, Talu Mussurani, waiting for them. 'I come with the canoe every night and wait, and here you are at last.' He rolled in the ground shouting in his falsetto voice: 'The right season has come. They are all here. The hippos are going to die and bellies will be full. Yoho, yohooooo . : .'

He made so much noise that the whole village woke, and when they landed on the other bank, they saw Umaru and the Firgun fishermen waiting for them. Hermann embraced them, and all faces were smiling, because the white men had brought Issufu back and the hunt could begin.

* * *

'Oh, it was a fine wedding,' said Lam, recalling the festivities that had taken place in the past days. They were all sitting round the fire, and Duma gave the mutton-bone he had been gnawing to Talu Mussurani, who began to suck it, still dreamy-eyed at the memory of Issufu's wedding.

'Here it is,' said Duma, 'the story of the great palaver. It's a great day when we arrive. We bring out presents, we give them to all our friends. We put on our *bubus*, our shoes, our hats, and we walk around. We walk round, and people say: look, there are the Kurmizas, oh, they've made money and got fine clothes. We give them kola-nuts and tobacco, and everybody is happy. Then comes the first palaver: the people of Firgun say, Ayissata mustn't come to sing, she costs too much. Issufu doesn't like this. He says nothing and pays his bride-price. The parents say, it's not enough. Issufu gets angry and I say, Look out, or he'll call his spirits! The parents take the money, and don't say any more. The *griots* come. There are three of them with a fiddler. We have a good party and then comes the second palaver, the war of the *griots*. We have the gramophone on all day, and people say, Oh, those are very fine records. The *griots* don't like it and shout very loud. So does the gramophone. They are given money, a little here and a little there—now they're happy again. Then the Imam¹ comes, we all go to the mosque. He speaks and he is given kola-nuts. Umaru is happy as anything, for now Issufu has got Adiza. In the evening Issufu's spirit, Captain Mugu, has to be asked if he is pleased with the wife of his horse. The spirit comes and Issufu—listen to the third palaver—Issufu charges at the door of his hut. He breaks it good and proper. He breaks everything. After that the spirit is pleased with Adiza, so Issufu takes his wife and lives with her for three days; he sleeps with her, but does not touch her. The third night he goes through, and the old women walk round with the blanket. Everyone is happy, Adiza was a virgin. In the morning she heaps millet outside Issufu's hut. We greet her and Issufu is very happy. Now it's over, and she is Umaru's daughter. Since then we have been arranging the camp. We put straw on the roof to stop the great heat, and Talu makes a little earth oven.'

¹ Mohammedan priest.

'Yes,' said Talu, torn from his reverie, 'a little earth oven, nice and hot to make bread on.'

'If you go behind Umaru's compound,' said Lam, 'if you go down to the edge of the river, you will see something that will please you.'

'What is it?' asked Hermann.

The little Fulani smiled. 'If the two white men will walk a short way, they will see.'

'All right—come on then, Luc. Good night, boys—see you tomorrow.'

'Good night, white men.'

Seven

THE night was soft, and the sound of the great river, slow and regular, filled their hearts with joy. A horse began galloping in the moonlight, and for a few moments the earth reverberated with the clatter of its hooves. There was no wind. The village was asleep. The grey mud-huts and bulging grain-stores, dotted with flat stones, threw long shadows along the little paths and low fences. A turtle-dove flew off from a quiet tree, breaking into the night's silence with a frantic beating of wings. They heard the crunch of their feet in the sand. The waters glittered in the distance, and a slight lapping on the reeds could be heard from a peaceful inlet.

The big boat was there in front of them. Her sides were almost chest-high above the water. The boards, thick as a hand, were stitched together with long cords of vegetable fibre, fixed round a whole trunk of squared acacia serving as a stem. The wood had been shaped with an adze, but had swollen in the water, so that the boat was about twenty feet long and over six feet wide. The grooves and holes through which the cords passed were caulked with a mixture of mud, reeds and horse-dung.

Hermann jumped on to one of the tough tie-beams which made the boat solid enough to resist a charging hippo, and stood there leaning over the side, legs apart and powerful body, gazing tight-jawed at the river before him. It was an attitude of silent challenge; he seemed to be gathering his forces for the final struggle, which would lead him to victory or death.

Luc wondered who would be piloting the boat back:

would it be Dikko, the white goddess with her long fingers, or would it be this man of clay? Would Dikko close the eyes of this noble face near the tree of the great river, or could Hermann soon parade to men and gods the old giant tied behind the big boat? And what blood would be demanded for his distant vengeance by that dead harpooner who haunted the tall reeds?

'Listen carefully,' Hermann said to Luc; and his voice drowned the voice of the river. The shadow of the boat could be seen on the water, and over this shadow the shadow of the man who stood there.

'Listen,' he repeated gravely. 'There is something I must ask you to do for me. If what I ask is too hard for you, Luc, you must go away now, knowing that from the bottom of my heart I shall understand you.'

He remained silent for a moment, and the sound of the river filled their ears. Then, in calm dispassionate tones, he asked Luc what he had to ask, and Luc answered from the bank: 'Yes, Hermann, since that is your choice, I will do what you ask. If you are wounded and the great giant escapes from you, then I will shoot you.'

The man of solitude spat into the waters, into the calm waters among the reeds, so that the stain should pass into the currents and eddies, and the mistress of the water would know that war had begun.

He looked into the distance once more, then turned and jumped out of the boat. He put his hand on Luc's shoulder, and they went back to the camp. The night was soft, and the sound of the great river, slow and regular, filled their hearts with courage.

* * *

Early next morning they went to greet Adiza. She was heaping millet outside the door of her hut. She smiled on seeing them, and thanked them for their presents. Issufu limped out of the hut and shook hands with them. 'My father has told the fishermen to be ready. We're waiting for them now,

and tomorrow, if they're all here, we'll ask the spirits for permission to go on the hunt.'

'We'll talk to the spirits,' said Hermann, 'and then we shall see what they decide.'

Issufu looked at him hard. 'I think I am the man who must harpoon the old giant.'

'And I'm sure I am the man,' answered Hermann, returning the stare for a moment; then he swung round and went off.

'Look out,' said Luc, 'he wants his hippo.'

'The old giant will choose for himself,' Hermann replied calmly.

The village was full of the signs of the coming struggle. Outside all the fishermen's huts there were lines of harpoons with their barbed blades pointing skywards. Elderwood floats, collected in bundles, were drying out on trays. All the Firgun fishermen were assembled on an esplanade of beaten earth behind Umaru's compound, sharpening their blades, hafting them on to wooden shafts, and driving the wood into the floats by angle-blocks. When they finished this job, they put their harpoons down, point upwards, against the huts. They carved extra paddles, while the smith branded the owner's mark on the new blades. Umaru, bare-chested, in a pair of faded blue cotton trousers, was sharpening the killer-spears. They had a short handle, and a wide cutting blade, as long and broad as his fore-arm: their function was to finish the hippos off by cleaving deep into the nerves between neck and head.

'Tomorrow,' said Umaru, 'if all the Sorkos are here, we'll have a festival for the spirits.'

'That is good, Umaru. In that way all the old quarrels will be settled.'

'All of them.' Umaru smiled gaily. 'We must get going, and before we do, all must be settled. Otherwise look out for accidents!'

'The old chief is in good heart?'

'Yes, he is in good heart.'

* * *

All the fishermen and villagers of Firgun were gathered together in a small square near the great river. A fiddler and four drummers had their backs sheltered from the sun by some thatch of dried millet; they were surrounded by a circle of seated men and women, with the group of Sorkos in their cotton *bubus* and caps making a patch of blue in the centre. Hermann and Luc were flanked by Umaru, Issufu, Adamu and Billo Goudel; near them Illo and Wali were talking in a low voice. Since the beginning of the afternoon the spirit-horses had been whirling round to the sound of the thin, insistent music, and now the sun was setting, the first spirits would soon come down to possess their horses. The *zeema*, priest of the religion, would then leave the circle, while the fishermen talked to the spirits temporarily incarnate in the bodies of these humble millet-heaping women.

The musicians played the tune of Mussa, Dongo's brother, and the violinist sang his chant:

Niouri, if the sun burns, leave your bow of black iron!

Niouri, if the sun burns, do not draw your bow!

Niouri, if you aim an arrow, you set the bush aflame!

Niouri, chief of the fishermen!

One of the dancers grew pale: eyes lowered, she went on dancing with the same delicate, rhythmical steps, skimming over the sand on her cracked bare feet. This was Fatimata, one of the Firgun women. The fiddler launched into the tune of Kiry, another of Dongo's brothers:

'Grandson of Mamar, grandson of Kassy, Zungu Dani!

Maru Kiry, you cut iron to make yourself sandals!

Maru Kiry, all the birds have two wings!

Maru Kiry, you have fifty pairs of wings!

Fatimata was seized by convulsive trembling. She fell on the ground and began to writhe in the dust groaning. Two of the 'calm women' gently picked her up and began to clothe her in the spirit's embellishments. She went on yelling as Kiry

took possession of her body. The musicians burst out, and the fiddler sang the spirit's chants:

'Maru Kiry, you come down from Gao!

You empty a grain-store of millet for your enemy!

You refuse a grain of millet to your friend!

The day will come when your enemy shall be your friend!

The day will come when your friend shall be your enemy!

Maru Kiry, grandson of Mamar, grandson of Kassy!

Fatimata had only just been dressed when Dongo descended on to the head of another dancer, and the voice of the fiddler rose to the sky while the dazed spirit-horse was weeping in the dust:

The tierkors are below, Dongo is above!

He must strike, strike with might and main,

Strike with lumps of rock, strike with great boulders,

The man that hears but will not listen!

Strike, Dongo, strike—you saviour of men.'

Everything happened very fast now. A woman became possessed by Mussa Gurmanchi, another of Dongo's brothers. Directly she had been clothed in the spirit's adornments and was raising a little bow of black iron, another woman from the island fell on her knees in front of the musicians, and began beating her arms together faster and faster. Her face was stained with froth and sand, she gave periodical hiccoughs. The 'calm women' handed her a long white cloth, and a murmur of satisfaction ran through the group of fishermen: Harakwa Dikko had come down from heaven to talk to them:

Daughter of Ullow, thunder-cloud of Kandan!

Our ancestor who rose from nothing but a heap of red earth!

You the stone in the low waters!

Mother of the isle of Kassani!

Mother of the isle of Norilli!

Dikko from the banks of the river, camel-driver of Yukum!

Borom, Borom, Botya!

Dikko, bright daughter of black Ullow!

Chief of the drums of Tubal!
Chief of the palms of Dara!
Mistress of the belt of hide!
Chief of the stables of Si!
Dikko who gave birth to Dikko!
The current must flow against the current.
The current must turn and turn again,
The current must become a whirlpool!
Dikko, the shea-tree of the great river!
Dikko, mother of Bulaimani Talaimani!
Dikko sambo, sambo gainaku!

The drumsticks pattered on to the gourds, the fiddler's bow played Dikko's tune, and his chant made the fishermen's hearts beat faster. He went into the 'harpooner's tune' to let Dikko know that the men were only there to talk about the hunt.

'They've all come,' said Umaru, his eyes shining. 'Mussa Gurmanchi, and Kiry, and Dongo, and Harakwa Dikko!' Rising, followed by the fishermen and the two white men, he offered a mat to the spirits and a cushion to Dikko. With glassy eyes, the spirits listened to Wali repeating their chants in their honour.

The musicians stopped, and everyone listened to Umaru, chief of the fishermen, as he addressed the spirits: 'We the Sorkos ask you for hippos.'

'Oh Umaru,' said Harakwa Dikko, the white mistress of the water, whose face was covered 'in white cloths, 'you have forgotten, then: you and the fishermen did not listen to me the last time I came. But I shall always remember. I have protected the old giant and no one can do anything against him. This time you shall not have a single hippo.'

'Forgiveness, Dikko, I ask your forgiveness in the name of all the fishermen. After this hunt I will kill a white sheep for you.'

'No, Umaru, I cannot forget.'

'Forgive us, Dikko, hear our prayer. A man died because we did not obey you. I and the fishermen will kill two

white sheep for you—but remember the man who died!

‘Perhaps Dikko will accept your penitence,’ said Dongo, ‘but you must obey everything she says.’

‘Yes,’ said Umaru, ‘this time we will obey her.’

‘Since you wish it, you can hunt,’ said the mistress of the water, sadly raising her arm, ‘but there will be blood if I am not obeyed, and I shall put a spell on the water of the river. Those who do not obey me will be struck down. If the Sorkos do not unite, if divisions break out among them, nothing can go right. All the Sorkos must obey Umaru, who is their chief.’

‘Thank you, Dikko,’ said Umaru. ‘How many hippos do you allow us?’

‘Four. Only four.’

‘Do you forbid us to attack the old giant?’

‘No. If you find the bearded old giant, hurl your harpoons, but woe to the first man to hurl his harpoon, for he will bear the whole burden of the hunt, and if the old giant finds him, he will kill him.’

‘Who is to hurl the first harpoon?’ asked Issufu.

‘You will know that only when the old giant brings out his head—not before.’

‘May a white hunter hunt with us?’ Again the question was from Issufu.

‘White is Dikko’s colour,’ said Dongo.

‘Yes, it is my colour, and that white hunter may hurl the harpoon with you.’

Issufu frowned, and withdrew from the circle.

‘Look out,’ said Kiry. ‘Look out if the hunt takes you far from home, for then you must give the hippo’s head intact to the owners of the water.’

‘Yes,’ said Umaru, ‘we will obey you too, and this price shall be paid.’

‘Umaru is in command of the hunt,’ Mussa declared Gurmanchi. ‘If another takes Umaru’s place, I will burn his village.’ The spirit tapped his little bow of black iron.

'Thank you, Mussa, we will obey you too!'

'Look out,' said Dongo, 'I will have a white horse for this hunt, but he must look out.'

'Thank you, Dongo,' said Hermann. 'Should I change my name?'

'Your name!' said Harakwa Dikko sorrowfully. 'But you have already lost your name. Your colour is white. You are An'Sara. Only An'Sara.'

'An'Sara!' Luc repeated, looking at Hermann.

'Is there any blood demanded by the blood of Idrissa?' asked Damuri.

'You will see what blood when the moment comes,' Dikko lifted the white cloths to show her face.

'Hippo's blood?' asked Umaru.

'That depends on you all,' Dikko answered. 'Perhaps hippo's blood, perhaps fisherman's blood.'

'Woe, woe to you, if you do not obey our orders,' said Kiry.

'Follow God and Umaru,' said Dikko. 'If Umaru asks you to follow him in the middle of the night, follow him. If he asks you to rise and leave, follow him. If you follow him and are united, you shall hurl your *zogus*, your harpoons, at the hippos, and you shall bring back four without misfortune. Otherwise—otherwise woe to all the Sorkos.'

'On whose shoulders shall the heritage of death fall?' Hermann asked. 'Who is Idrissa's heir?'

'On him who knows better than all the others!' said the mistress of the water.

'On him whose eye has seen!' said Dongo.

'On him whose arm does not obey his head,' said Kiry.

Mussa Gurmanchi remained silent but nodded his head, and then fell prostrate. The spirits were leaving their horses. They had talked to the fishermen and now they were returning to the sky, riding the dark clouds of the nights.

* * *

Billo drew his knife, raised the head of the white sheep, and

with a single stroke cut its throat. The blood trickled on to the blades of the eighty harpoons collected in bundles. Billo raised the sheep's head so that all the harpoons should be sprinkled with the blood. The animal's feet thrashed about, and blood frothed up. Billo threw the body into the dust, and while it was jerking in its last agonies, he cut the second sheep's throat, leading it along by the harpoons so that each blade should have its share of the sticky blood. The sacrifice was complete. The twenty Sorkos turned towards Umaru, the old chief sat apart from them, and spoke in a loud voice:

'All quarrels must be settled. All disputes must be forgotten tonight. We must set out on the hunt with clear hearts. Any Sorkos with reproaches to make against other Sorkos should come to see me at once; then if God wills it and the Sorkos have not spoilt hearts, all will be settled.'

Mukaila from Firgun was the first to speak. 'One day I lent a canoe to Illo. He left for Kutugu with that canoe. I've been asking for it ever since, but he hasn't returned it. That is not right.'

Illo snorted. 'Your wretched old canoe is at the bottom of the river. I got in it one day, it opened like a calabash and I had to swim back. Perhaps your great-grandfather's great-grandfather used it. Really it was too old.'

'It's true that it was old,' Mukaila admitted, 'but it could have been repaired. You must give me something to pay for the loss.'

'A thin chicken,' said Illo with a smile, 'and that's more than it was worth.'

'A lamb,' said Mukaila.

'Two hundred francs,' said Umaru. 'Would you both agree to that?'

'All right,' said Illo. 'There's a trip that cost me a lot.'

'And two hundred francs will suit me,' said Mukaila.

'I owe you two hundred francs then,' said Illo, 'and that settles the matter.'

'What other Sorkos have accounts to settle?' asked Umaru.

'I have,' said Wali the *griot*. 'Your son came back from Kurmi and didn't give me anything.'

'Two *bubus* to Wali, Issufu! You must give Wali two *bubus*.'

'Right,' said Issufu. 'I'll bring two *bubus* for this greedy *griot*.'

'One day three winters ago,' said Chekor, 'Suley insulted the Goudel family at the Ayoru market.'

'Dyam!' exclaimed Suley. 'I never insulted anybody. I only said that the Goudels ate their catch without ever giving any to the chief of the Sorkos.'

'That's quite true,' said Umaru. 'Have you ever once given me part of your catch, Chekor?'

'If I haven't given you any,' answered an embarrassed Chekor, 'it was because the catch wasn't a good one.'

'I am old, Chekor,' said Umaru, 'and I know what happens when you go fishing. You never return without a good catch.'

'You see,' said Suley, 'there were no lies told, I spoke the truth. You mustn't be angry with me for that.'

'I apologise for Chekor,' put in Billo, his brother. 'From now on the chief shall always have his portion.'

Umaru smiled. 'Then everything is settled. Chekor, Suley, and I, Umaru, have forgotten everything.'

'Everything,' said Suley.

'Everything,' said Chekor, and put his hand on the chief's shoulder.

'We obey the gods, we obey Umaru,' pronounced Wali, 'and soon we shall have meat.'

* * *

Leaving Firgun, the flotilla of fishermen went up-stream to establish a hunting-camp on the island of Sentia.

Wali, Dani Dubi the smith, Karimu and Baraki Goudel took the paddles in the big boat, with Baraki in command. Hermann, now called An'Sara by the fishermen, was in a small canoe with Billo Goudel and Adamu. Luc had with

him Illo Goudel and Abdu. All the rest had formed crews of two men to a canoe: Umaru with Abdulai, Chekor with Issaka the one-eyed, Mamadu-from-the-river-bank with Damuri, Issufu with Mukaila, Nuhu-of-Firgun with Nuhu-of-the-Isle, and Suley with Mamadu-of-the-Isle. The eight little canoes followed each other to the edge of the *burgu*, where the current lost its strength; then the fishermen punted along by the great reeds, a man at each end.

Sentia was a small island dotted with bushes and green trees. It was nearer the Gurma than the Hausa bank, lying opposite the rice-field of Ayoru, halfway between Firgun and the rock of Yassani: its remoteness made it the ideal spot for a hunting-camp. Near this rice-field, in the swamp of *burgu* extending along the dam of stones and beaten earth, lived the great herd of hippos. In the night they trampled over the dam, breaking it in some places, to go and eat the tender young rice-shoots.

Chekor, steering at the head of the line of canoes, suddenly stood up, his *hargyi* in hand: this was a small harpoon with two or three points, while the big harpoon, the *zogu*, had only one point. Issaka the one-eyed stayed leaning on his pole, not making any movement. 'Dyo!' cried Chekor, releasing his arm, and the *hargyi* pierced the water. Then Issaka pressed hard on the pole, to send the boat forward. Chekor bent down and pulled in the harpoon, which had a tiger-fish struggling at the end of the two fine barbs.

'The *zogu* hasn't talked yet,' said Illo Goudel, 'but the belly is always glad of any fish, big or small.'

They landed on Sentia. The sun was beating down on the island, as they pulled the canoes on to the sand, and moored the big boat to a tree on the bank. They took their harpoons, spears, blankets and large earthenware pots off the canoes. In half an hour the camp was ready, and Umaru sat apart by a fire of three stones, on which he was preparing the magic water that must now protect the fishermen against accidents on the hunt. The water was heating in one of the

pots; then Umaru added some pinches of a mysterious powder which he brought out of his cap. Directly he had uttered the words that would make him master of the hunt, he called the rest of the fishermen round him.

The men came and formed a circle round the fire; then each in turn thrust his ankles, wrist and face into the black water. They were very serious, for the hunt was the gods' business and the gods could now claim the life of any fisherman who did not obey their orders.

Immediately afterwards Umaru sent off Suley's canoe and Issufu's to search for the herd of hippos. The rest stayed on the island, checking their harpoons, lying on their mats, and getting a meal ready.

'How long might the hunt last?' Luc asked Hermann.

'A week, a fortnight. Things may happen very fast, or they may take a long time. If all goes well, we should be back at Firgun by the end of the month.'

Hermann smiled wearily, like a soldier before a dawn attack, then pulled his bush hat over his eyes and lay down on the ground to rest—for in a few hours the great adventure was starting.

* * *

'Dyam!' cried Issufu, jumping out of his canoe. 'I've never seen so many hippos. There are ten, fifteen, twenty of them—you can't say for sure, but anyhow there are heaps of them and they make lots of noise. Suley stayed near them to follow them.'

'They're not afraid,' said Mukaila. 'It's ages since they were hunted.'

'Off we go,' ordered Umaru. 'The big boat is to start slowly, a long way behind us. As soon as you arrive, Baraki, hide in the *burgu* and wait till I call you. Where's Suley, Issufu?'

'To the north of the dam. And the hippos aren't far from the dam.'

'In that case,' said Umaru, 'I'll take two canoes with me.'

We'll follow the dam and close their way to the south. The other canoes will wait in mid-stream, at the edge of the *burgu*. Chekor will be at the north to pursue the herd if they escape.'

The men climbed into their canoes, and Luc felt his heart contracting as he saw Hermann sitting in the middle of his canoe, harpoons ready to hand. This tough and powerful man was now no more than a frail figure lost amidst the waters, borne on the most delicate of craft, unarmed except for the black blades of his harpoons and the agile arms of his paddlers. He would have to strike, then retreat to avoid the hippo's charge, attack again and again retreat, without knowing if the adversary was in front of him, behind him, or even under the boat. He would be fighting in hostile waters and treacherous reeds, his only incentive the overwhelming lust to kill, although the end, whether victory or defeat, could bring this creature of flesh, bone and blood no new experience, no satisfaction but the lassitude of a mastered body, the incurable weariness of what-must-be. For the bitter satisfaction, or the admission of disgrace, was already accepted, and none of it could be altered any more. This complete detachment at the mysterious borders of life and death, this haughty disdain for his own frailty which allowed him to preserve the closed inviolable world of his human will-power, also restored to him the clear-hearted strength of his solitude.

When Hermann leant over the side of the canoe, all the glittering waters showed him was the reflection of his own face. The old giant would never be seen there, unless the water's mirror were shattered, and he came up, blinking and blowing in the fierce sun, dark as a rock, his face branded with the harpoon blade. How little it would all matter then, days and nights, water and bush, spirits and men, words and silence! For in the last resort Hermann would be the only victor, because he was the hunter and the killer.

* * *

The fishermen crossed the great river. Followed by one other canoe, Umaru steered into the reeds, while Chekor went off northwards. Suley raised his arm, pointing to a place in the *burgu* where the reeds were moving. They waited for the big boat. When it arrived, it took cover to the south. The fishermen silently got into position, and the beat began. The protracted blowing of the hippos coming to the surface could be heard amidst a crunch of trampled reeds. On each canoe the man in the bow, harpoon on his shoulder, scoured the waters with his eyes. In the stern the other fisherman pressed on his pole, so that the canoes glided noiselessly through the *burgu*. Someone banged his pole on the gunwale. There was an echo of wood against wood, followed by a strange cry from the swamps. 'Ohooo!' yelled Umaru, giving the signal to advance.

'The hippos have heard us,' Illo told Luc. 'The old man is saying to the herd: look out, there are the Sorkos. Hey, Abdu, just watch, now the *zogu*'s going into action.'

In the sun, two hundred yards away, Luc saw the arm of Nuhu-of-the-Isle being released like a spring, and the harpoon shooting high in the air. Their hearts were filled with terror at the cry which followed. A hippo rose, giving a short shrill bellow, then dropped, crushing the reeds beneath it. Nuhu hurled a second harpoon right into its head, then slid back to the other end of the canoe, took his pole and helped the man punting from the stern to return to mid-stream as quickly as possible. As he had been the first to harpoon it, the creature would always be called Nuhu-of-the-Isle's hippo; but right to the end of the hunt he would pay for this brief glory. From now on he was 'the pursued': his frail shoulders would have to bear all the hatred of the hippo, which would kill him if it found him.

The other canoes converged on the place where the hippo had received its two harpoons. Damuri hurled three more, missing with one but scoring with the other two. Now the hippo charged the canoes. Damuri could be seen

swaying, then falling back to a sitting position: in its charge the hippo had grazed his canoe. Hermann hurled two harpoons.

'An'Sara,' said Illo. 'An'Sara has planted two!' he leaned on his pole.

At the edge of the *burgu* they saw the floats pass, coiled in the tall reeds. Abdu had taken his spear, and Illo, arm taut and harpoon ready, was watching the water. A huge head appeared five yards away from them.

'Dyo!' yelled Illo, and the blade went into the hippo's shoulder. It shook itself, and gave the same frightful bellow as it had done just before in the *burgu*. The harpoon's wooden handle shot into the air, while the blade, attached by its rope to the float, stuck into the hippo. Luc handed a harpoon to Illo, who hurled it as hard as he could. It hit the hippo, which had just dived, in the middle of the back. The canoes of Suley and Issufu were already racing downstream, following the drifting line of floats. The hippo came up for air more frequently, and each time new harpoons were sunk in its thick hide, piercing the flesh to a depth of two hands. The canoes could manoeuvre more easily in mid-stream than in the *burgu*. The fishermen felt the quarry was nearly theirs, and there was great rivalry in the skill with which they hurled their harpoons. Now the big boat abandoned its procession-like pace and came to the field of battle. Baraki was yelling from the bow, and in the stern Wali the *griot* sang the chant of Harakwa Dikko, who had shown herself favourable to the fishermen: 'Dikko, you shea-tree of the great river—Dikko sambo sambo gainaku!'

Issufu came up behind the hippo, bent down and collected a bunch of floats and long reeds from the water. Baraki, leaning over the big boat's high sides, had only just snatched the bunch from his hands when the hippo attacked. Issufu's paddler succeeded in avoiding the charge by backing precipitately, but the big boat received the enormous mass amidships, and rolled from side to side.

Baraki quickly tied floats to the large rope and took two turns round the stem, then threw the floats back into the water. The hippo was now tied to the big boat; it threw up its head, trying to seize one side of the boat in its jaws, then went off downstream, sounding and surfacing, while Baraki and Dani Dubi took extra turns in the rope to reduce the distance between the hippo's head and the boat's stem. The canoes followed slowly. Billo Goudel leapt off his on to the big boat, took the short, wide killer-spear, and went to the bow. The hippo's head was against the stem. Billo dug the spear in behind the neck, cut through the hide and turned the blade in the tender flesh, trying to sever the nerves. The hippo bellowed and rallied its last forces to shake off the spear.

'Dyam!' said Billo, as the spear flew out, sticking into the side of the boat.

He was handed another spear. Taking careful aim, he plunged it in with all the weight of his body, moving his arms about so that it would penetrate better. A stream of blood shot into the fast-reddening water, and the hippo gave a last convulsive movement.

'O hippo, mother of the currents!' cried Wali, weeping with joy. Suddenly there was a terrible crash against the whole frame of the big boat. For a moment she was lifted above the surface; then she plomped back into the splashing blood-stained water. The canoes were several dozen yards away, and each fisherman, standing in the bow, prepared to hurl his harpoon. Pale and tense, Hermann looked downstream, where the charge had come from. Suddenly the old giant was there in front of them: marked out by the black blade embedded in his nose, blinking his eyes and blowing furiously. His ears kept wagging, and the cruel little eyes on the top of his head looked at every harpooner, as if trying to remember each body of this multiple foe so as to strike them down the more surely when the moment came.

'Dyo!' cried Chekor, hurling his harpoon.

The old giant dived alongside the big boat. Silence had fallen over the waters, and no sound came from the canoes. Then he appeared again, in the middle of the great river, far from the Sorkos' canoes. Once more he gave them a long stare before disappearing under the surface.

'The first harpoon I've missed with this season,' said Chekor, lowering his eyes.

'Thank God!' said Issufu grimly.

Hermann smiled, but made no comment.

Watching the surface of the muddy waters, the Sorkos waited a while. Then, as it seemed certain that the old giant had now fled northwards with the rest of the herd, Umaru chose two divers. They jumped into the water, with a long rope round their backs, to tie by its feet the dead hippo lying at the bottom of the river. Often they had to come up for air, and they got Luc to give them a dagger, so that they could cut through the tangle of floats, reeds and ropes, which at present impeded operations. Two hours later the huge mass was secured to the stern of the big boat, and the flotilla crossed the Niger again, returning to Sentia where the creature could be carved up.

Nuhu-of-the-Isle's hippo was a cow of almost two and a half tons.

'The old giant's wife,' observed Illo. 'Now he'll be in a fury all through the hunt.'

Talu Mussurani had come with Lam in a canoe, and they were waiting for the white men. The Sorkos told them about the battle, and Lam turned pale when he heard that the old giant had attacked them.

'Not very hard,' said Adamu. 'Simply to say: I'm here, you know, and don't you Sorkos forget you've got me to reckon with!'

'He's cunning, the old devil,' said Lam, 'he's very cunning. An'Sara had better take good care.'

'I'm with him,' Adamu declared proudly, 'and we have Billo Goudel in our canoe.'

They all went to bed very quickly, because they were exhausted and the next morning the dead hippo must be carved up.

* * *

Luc gave a last glance at the pieces of meat being cured in the sun. The skeleton of a huge head, scraped to the bone, the vertebral column and two femurs—that was all that remained of the old giant's wife. The Sorkos had gorged themselves with meat 'till they couldn't any more,' as Abdu put it with a violent belch.

Hermann's canoe returned from the reconnaissance on which Umaru had sent it with Damuri. The herd had definitely gone north, beyond the Rock of Yassani, not very far from the village of Bossa Ido. At present they were grazing in the *burgu*, but as Adamu remarked, they had become suspicious.

The Sorkos filled their canoes with blankets and extra harpoons, for with the herd so far off they couldn't keep Sentia as a hunting base; the camp must be shifted northwards. They left Talu Mussurani to guard the meat, with orders to bring it to the new camp when it was cured.

'The Sorkos always behave like this,' said Adamu, laughing. 'They dry lots of meat, saying: for the winter—and a week later they've eaten everything and have to hold their bellies because they've got pains.'

The flotilla punted slowly up the Hausa bank. As he passed below the Rock of Yassani, a dark granite cliff rising over the river, Umaru raised his eyes to it and pronounced the chant of the spirit of the rock.

A little way before Bossa Ido they established their camp under three shea-trees, which Wali found a favourable omen, because these trees were sacred to Harakwa Dikko.

Damuri was waiting for them up-stream. The herd was here, but hearing the canoes, they dived at once, and a few minutes later reappeared a good way further north.

Umaru ordered the canoes to assemble, and as soon as

they were all there, Hermann asked whether everyone agreed to stop hunting for meat, and only hunt to wipe out the old disgrace.

'Yes,' the Sorkos answered, 'today we are only hunting the old giant.'

After a long and harassing struggle through the reeds—made still harder by the fact that the waters were high; in fact the flooded millet impeded their progress, checking the sides of the canoes with its tough stalks—they saw Umaru at their head pointing to the herd, gathered in the reeds about twenty yards away from him.

Issufu cut rapidly into mid-stream, placing himself opposite the *burgu*, in front of the flotilla, harpoon in hand, silent and tense.

Hermann uttered a muffled oath and dashed up behind him. The hippos must have heard them, and Umaru signalled to everyone to go north; but it was too late. Luc saw a huge bull, evidently covering the herd's retreat, come up for air two yards from Issufu; Issufu planted his harpoon into the neck, almost at the shoulder. The hippo came charging at the canoe, and if Mukaila hadn't had the presence of mind to thrust his pole against the hippo's head and push so as to get back into the centre of the river, their canoe would have been smashed. While they were escaping, Umaru and Hermann had dashed up to the scene of the battle. The hippo gave a terrible bellow and came up facing them, beating the water with its feet. Umaru harpooned it right in the chest and Hermann in the shoulder. It gave another bellow and charged. Adamu swung the canoe half round, and the charge passed by them. Hermann plunged another harpoon in its back, then turned, shouting to Luc: 'It's not the old giant, but he's a very big bull, and dangerous. So look out!'

The Sorkos waited in mid-stream, but a noise of reeds being trampled and the sound of short grunts showed them where the hippo was struggling in the *burgu*. The battle had

become dangerous: in the reeds you had to manoeuvre with the pole, and the hippo, which seemed to be crazed with pain, might smash the canoes with its head; they would have no chance to get away.

Some way off Issufu was punting down-stream, presumably telling the big boat to come quickly back to the rest of the Sorkos. Umaru advanced into the *burgu*, calling out the chant of his harpoons:

Zirbini must be as the Zirbini of Farakani Maka Boti:

Yes, the *zogu* must strike and the hippo die!

In the name of God in the name of Harakwa Dikko!

With an amazing calm, the old chief, his feet apart, aimed three harpoons at five yards, sinking two in the hippo's neck and one in the head. A terrible bellow rang out in the silence of the great reeds. Umaru and Abdulai shoved their poles as hard as they could to return to mid-stream before the charge. They passed in front of Luc's canoe, and he saw the hippo emerge, exposing its side to them. It was impeded by the floats and reeds, and swam heavily, puffing with all its might. Abdu hurled his three harpoons: one slid off the thick hide, but the other two stuck in right up to the shaft. Illo was already paddling away. The hippo now had nine harpoons in its body.

'That's good,' said Illo, as he recovered his breath. 'With two or three it can shake off the floats and escape, but with nine we've caught it for sure.'

'That crazy Issufu,' said Hermann, coming over to them, 'he *would* go and hurl his harpoon!' Hermann's features were drawn, though his eyes were shining.

'We've got two more to kill,' said Luc.

'Yes, we've got two more, but as you'll see, the rest will be more and more suspicious, and more and more dangerous.'

He made a sign to Adamu to follow the heaps of floating reeds which were drifting in mid-stream; close ahead of them the hippo would now and then surface to breathe, snort, and dive again.

The canoes followed it, and the fishermen, calculating the moment when it would just have come to the surface, hurled new harpoons each time. There were a good thirty harpoons sticking in its flesh, and it was coming up more and more often, when the big boat, driving between it and the floating anchor, rammed it with the rope fender on her stem. Baraki quickly leant over and passed his large rope under the reeds. Wali held on to one of his feet, for he might easily have been wounded if he had fallen.

'Dyam!' said Baraki. 'Now he's our horse'; and he tied the big rope under the stem.

'Don't hurl any more harpoons,' said Umaru. 'He'll tire himself out dragging the big boat, and when his head's near the side, we'll finish him off with the spears.'

They had come down-stream, and in the distance under the shea-trees the Sorkos' camp could be seen.

The hippo moved off towards the *burgu*, and on feeling a patch of mud beneath its feet, turned, trying to bite the stem. It succeeded in getting hold of a plank from the side, while the boat rolled and the men used their weight on the opposite side to stop her capsizing. Bursting the seams, the hippo tore out the plank.

'Daughter of the river's daughter!' cried Wali, launching into the big boat's chant to revive his courage. 'Stronger than the mother of the currents! The shea-tree is your bush house! Teeth can do nothing against the current which has become a whirlpool!'

Baraki had lashed himself into the bows and now sank his killer-spear in the hippo's eyes, piercing them both. It bellowed, taking its head under water; whereupon Baraki made a deep wound in its neck. Then Billo boarded the boat, took his brother's place, and plunged in the spear to half its length. The hippo writhed, gave a sort of jerk which shuddered the boat, then died, head beneath the water, while Wali sang its chant.

* * *

When they got back to camp, Umaru called the fishermen to a meeting. 'An'Sara wants to speak to you.' He sat down, bowing his head, because a Sorko had not kept his word.

'My heart is troubled,' said Hermann. 'You all gave me your word that your harpoons were sharpened for the old giant, only for the old giant—and then Issufu did not keep his promise.'

'A bad head and a good arm,' said Illo.

'What a lot of fuss about nothing!' Issufu exclaimed. 'Are you weeping already, An'Sara, when we've still two more hippos to kill? The old giant can come at the end. Sorkos like meat, and now there's lot of meat, thanks to this arm.' He slapped his arm, and laughed.

'Thanks for the meat,' said Billo, 'but a Sorko's word is of more value than any hippo.'

Issufu raised his hands to the sky. 'It's Dikko who made the hippo come up just in front of me. Can I go against her?'

'No,' said Chekor, 'you can't go against Dikko. But you went ahead of your father, and that is not right.'

'There are no reproaches to be made as far as I'm concerned,' said Umaru.

'We fishermen of Kutugu remind you of your promise,' Billo persisted. 'It's for the old giant we have come, it's for Idrissa we are here tonight in the bush.'

'If you want to kill two others,' said Chekor, 'and if you are going to forget the grandfather of the hippos, we may as well leave the hunt here and now.' He got up angrily, and moved out of the circle.

'Let's forget all that,' said Hermann, 'and from now on only think of the old giant. If no discords arise today, then by the grace of God we shall kill him.'

'There's a wise word,' said Umaru, and turned towards Chekor. 'Come back to us, Chekor, think of Dikko's promise. There must not be any quarrels between us.'

'All right,' said Chekor, calming down, 'since all the remaining harpoons are for the old giant, I shall forget

today, even though'—he tapped his stomach—'I still think of the meat.'

* * *

But the next day, at sunset, Issufu forgot the words of the gods, and Dikko put a spell on the water, blunting the points of the harpoons, knotting up the reeds in front of the canoes, and sending her curse on the Sorkos.

The Sorkos had carved up the hippo, and had been eating continuously since the morning. Pieces of meat were cooking in the pots, and everyone helped himself when he wanted, merely replacing the cooked meat with raw, in a meal which went on over ten hours. Now they were lying on their cotton blankets, still chewing meat and quietly digesting it. All round them, hanging from trees, garlands of red and black meat were drying in the sun.

An old man approached along the road to Gao. He was going north, and on his head he carried three sheaves of millet. At that time of the evening, without stick or luggage, he must certainly be making for Bossa Ido.

'Hullo, old father,' said Adamu.

'Greetings, old grandfather,' said Issufu. 'If you're hungry, there's still a bone to make a good broth from.' He lifted the hippo's jawbone and chuckled, very pleased with his joke.

The old man went on walking at the same pace, and did not turn his head.

'That is not right,' said Adamu. 'I don't like a man who carries three sheaves of millet on his head and doesn't look at you when you greet him. And you, Issufu, madder than a mad dog, you laugh at old men and don't know their power. Run and give the old man your sack of meat. If you don't, I leave the hunt.'

'And why should I go and feed an old man whose grain-store may be full and who is no relation of mine?'

'That settles it. Don't count on me any more, you fishermen. And may all the trouble Issufu has started rebound on his own head!' He threw down his harpoon furiously. 'I

leave you my harpoons, and may their chants protect Umaru.'

The rest watched the scene in silence.

'Who cares?' cried Issufu. 'A Sorko goes off because his heart is full of anger? What difference does that make, seeing there are nineteen of us left?' But despite his self-assurance, he seemed rather discomfited, and left the group.

'Adamu is leaving us, but I, Umaru, think Issufu's arm is worth that of two other fishermen.'

'Adamu, what fly is biting you?' asked Hermann.

'Oh, what sorrow!' Adamu answered. 'The fly that's biting me makes me leave the group of my brothers, but the sting Dikko is going to send you will hurt you all—because of this idiot whose head is full of wind, this idiot who has just sown discord and disobeys the words of Dikko.'

'Stay for my sake,' pleaded Hermann. 'Only for my sake.'

'An'Sara, my heart is sad, but I have said it. The luck of the hunt has just turned, and Dikko will put a spell on the bush opening out before you. When this idiot has paid the price, I will return. Today I leave you, and my heart is full of grief.'

Picking up his mat, blanket and sack of meat, Adamu went off on to the track. Walking at a good pace, he would be back at Firgun by the middle of the night.

'Oh Issufu, Issufu!' Hermann looked at the chief's son, and shook his head sadly.

'There's nothing to be done,' said Umaru. 'The Sorkos are free men, and if Adamu wants to leave, let him leave—no one can say anything to stop him.'

'We're not slaves,' said Issufu, 'and I'm surely entitled to laugh at an old man.'

'I never laugh at old men,' declared Billo Goudel, 'specially old men you don't know. Anyhow, Adamu sounds as if he knew more than we do. So may Dikko forgive us all if anything wrong has been done.' He pronounced Dikko's chant, and lay back on his mat.

'Because of your son my canoe is a man short,' Hermann told Umaru. 'How will you fix that?'

'Well,' said the old chief, 'I'm going to strengthen the big boat by putting Mamadu-of-the-Isle on it as well as the other fishermen, because with the old giant we'll need weight, agility, good eyes and good arms.' He shook his head four times, to stress that the foe would be hard to kill. 'For you, if you agree, Suley can take Adamu's place.'

'Praise be to God!' Hermann exclaimed. 'You've given me the best!'

A huge smile of pleasure creased Suley's face. 'An'Sara,' he said, 'I agree to be on your canoe. I have seen you drive in harpoons, and for me you are like another Sorko.'

'We're a canoe short this way, but it can't be helped,' said Umaru. 'Seven canoes are enough.'

'Oh yes,' said Wali. 'What counts is the heart.'

* * *

For five days the Sorko flotilla scoured the river. Patrolling along the two banks, in the *burgu* and in mid-stream, eyes smarting from these still and glittering waters, arms aching from handling the pole and backs aching from the paddles, the fishermen had seen no hippos since Bossa Ido. The herd went off ahead of them, moving farther and farther north, and no one could say when they would stop and accept battle. In the distance the Sorkos saw the rocks of the Labbazenga rapids gleaming in the sun, and the thing no one would have thought possible when they left Firgun was now becoming reality: the herd had gone up the rapids and taken refuge in the reach of Tamulis.

Umaru sent on one of his men to talk to the people of Labbazenga and find out if the herd had passed there. The canoe disappeared behind a small island, and the rest of the disheartened men, exhausted by the sun and their own weariness, lay down in the canoes, waiting for news. For five days they had eaten dried meat and drunk water from the river; everyone was hoping for a real halt and a real

night in the bush, which would allow them a hot meal and a few hours sleep.

'Are you asleep, Illo?' Luc asked in a low voice.

They were motionless in the reeds. Their eyes watched endlessly for the sudden rising of a hippo's head, to transmit to their arms the wild impulse—to kill. To kill without respite or truce, until the old giant was no more than an ant-devoured heap of bones on the bank, and in their memory a cruel, armoured monster with a man's thoughts in an animal's body.

'No,' said Illo, 'I'm thinking of the hunt.' He opened his tired, reddened eyes, and sprinkled a little water over his face.

'You were there at Idrissa's death?' Luc asked.

'Yes. It was Billo and I who brought him back. His neck was broken. Perhaps it was the old giant or perhaps a spirit that killed him.'

'Why do you say that, Illo?'

'When An'Sara with his spirit attacked the grandfather of hippos, the grandfather was the conqueror. At that moment, perhaps An'Sara's spirit was displeased that Idrissa should see him being beaten, so the spirit may have killed Idrissa. But that, Lussu, is a secret. It's side-stream talk, and may this talk remain in the side-stream!' He leant over the side and spat into the water. 'Look, here's the canoe back from Labbazenga already.' He pointed to a small craft making for the group of Sorkos.

'Well!' cried Umaru. 'What news of the herd?'

'Dyam!' answered a dismayed scout. 'They passed last night—walking on the bank. People saw them in the moonlight. There were about twenty, and two calves. At their head went the biggest hippo the villagers had ever seen.'

'The old giant!' breathed Hermann grimly.

'Forward!' Umaru called out. He stood in the middle of his canoe and hammered on the deck with his pole to rouse the dozing men. 'I won't stop this hunt while the old giant is alive.'

'Thank you,' said Hermann with a sad smile, picking up his pole and going to Suley's place so that Suley could snatch a little more rest.

The people of Labbazenga hauled them along the bank with long ropes. The current was very strong, and the big boat almost got carried away. The villagers sang as they tugged with all their might, gaining yard after yard at the cost of back-breaking efforts. They told the Sorkos about the passing of the herd in the moonlight and one old man said he'd seen many things in his life but never a hippo so huge and so strong.

The pursuit continued in the reach of Tamulis. The Sorkos knew now that the herd could only be a night ahead of them and that the two calves would delay the rest. At worst they should have caught up in three or four days.

The exacting chase in long reeds continued for four days. At the end of the fourth day Umaru looked at the empty water and the lifeless *burgu* unstirred by any hippo's blowing; seized by a sudden fear, he sent a canoe up-stream and another down-stream. Though it was hard to believe, the herd seemed to have vanished into thin air.

The Sorkos landed, and while the more resilient cooked rice, the others lay down in the sand to rest, waiting for the return of the reconnaissance canoes.

Damuri and Mamadu-of-the-river-bank were the first to come back. They had been north, and in the distance had seen the two rocks of Ansongo, but not a trace of the herd.

About three o'clock in the morning, the Sorkos were woken by Nuhu-of-the-Isle and Nuhu-of-Firgun, both dead-beat from twenty-four hours' punting and paddling. They had been south, and even before they spoke, their despairing faces told the story for them: the hippos had gone back south, completely deceiving their hunters! On the Gurma bank the two Nuhus had met a Fulani herdsman, who told them, still terrified, how a furious hippo had come trampling by his bush fire during the night, had attacked his

herds, scattering his cattle and killing a young calf. He showed them the calf's body, adding that it was a huge hippo and the flash of a black blade had gleamed from its nose.

Umaru ordered the Sorkos to strike camp and board their canoes. If the old giant wanted war, he should have it.

The flotilla glided over the water, with the reflection of the moon, cold and pearly, shining on the shoulders of the sleepy men. They all paddled in silence, and anxiety grew in their hearts because Dikko had put a spell on the water. By what baneful magic could a herd of twenty hippos become invisible and pass right between their canoes without a single Sorko either seeing or hearing it?

They passed the Labbazenga rapids at the end of the morning, and the villagers called out to them that the herd had passed again at dawn, going down-stream. The line of canoes sped through between rocks and foam and Illo remarked, gazing at the river: 'Look—the water's going down. The dry season will be here soon.'

At the end of the afternoon, right opposite Kutugu, in a fringe of reeds, Umaru saw a hippo's head emerge from the water and disappear again at once. He gave the signal for battle, and the Sorkos entered the *burgu*, harpoons in hands, standing in the bows of their canoes. From time to time a hippo could be heard blowing, followed by the noise of the reeds being crushed when it dived. The herd was here at last, in front of them, surrounded by their canoes.

Beneath the water but almost on the surface Luc could see a cow and its calf swimming back to the open stream. The young hippo's hide was very light in colour, and it swam behind its mother, beating the water with its paws. They had just passed the canoe, and Luc was quietly calling Illo to show him, when a man's cry rang out. Fifty yards away Luc saw Issufu's canoe being dashed over the reeds, while Mukaila and Issufu were shot into the water. Illo and Abdu let go of their harpoons, and punted swiftly to the scene of the accident.

They reached it at the same time as Umaru. The old chief had already rescued Mukaila; Abdu dived in and brought up Issufu, who had been clinging to his overturned canoe. 'Aie! Aie!' he groaned. His face was distorted and he seemed to be in great pain. They got him back on their canoe and laid him out on the bottom-boards. Umaru came alongside. 'What's the matter, my son?'

'I'm hurt,' said Issufu. 'I didn't see anything. The hippo charged and I found myself in the water. I dived at once and got a kick from his feet. Aie. Aie!'

'Where does it hurt?'

'In the knee. My bad knee.'

Luc examined the knee. There was a big bruise, but he could still bend it.

'I got a fright, but I wasn't hurt,' said Mukaila. '

'We must go back to Kutugu,' Illo Goudel suggested. 'We'll be able to dress his leg there.'

The other canoes had come near them and the Sorkos looked miserably at the injured man. An accident had happened, and now the encircled herd had broken through the barrier of canoes. The men were no longer masters of the water. Harakwa Dikko had put a spell on it. The long-fingered white mistress of the water, born from a heap of red earth beneath the shea-trees of the great river, was now against the Sorkos. What blundering word or deed had unleashed the power of the spirits against them? What would be the price demanded, what blood would the gods claim, before they took the spell off the great river?

All the fishermen were in a mood of deep despondency, when Hermann asked the question no one had yet dared ask: 'Was it the old giant who attacked you, Issufu?'

'I didn't see the hippo. He was big and powerful, but I didn't see his head.' He paused, then came out with what they were all afraid to hear: 'If it was the old giant, he knows me and my boat.'

Then the fear entered into their hearts, because if it was

the old giant, he could kill them all without their having a chance to protect themselves, since he no longer needed to raise his head to know which fisherman he was attacking.

Umaru wearily raised his arm and pointed to the other bank. 'Let's go to Kutugu, and all you Sorkos think of the spirits' words. If there has been any evil done by one among you, let him remember it and come to tell me. God willing, we shall try to repair the ill.'

Once again the flotilla crossed the Niger. They were no longer proud harpooners who landed at Kutugu, but beaten men, with hearts full of fear, doubting the strength inherited from their ancestors—because the hippos had outdone them in valour and cunning.

The people of Kutugu had seen them coming from a long way away. They were gathered on the bank, and among them were Adamu and Talu Mussurani.

'Dyam!' exclaimed Adamu, seeing Issufu carried off the canoe by two fishermen. 'One of you has been wounded?' He turned to Umaru. 'May I tell the old chief that I am sorry? My heart is sad to know that it is your son who has paid.' He lowered his eyes. 'But it was your son who had to pay.'

Umaru looked at him gravely. 'Adamu, if you are to speak, you should speak now.'

'Yes,' said Hermann, 'there is a spell on the water, and we want to know why, and also which man must be blamed for the spell.'

'A spirit's word was not respected,' Adamu answered.

'Tell us,' said Umaru. 'If it can be made good we must make it good.'

Adamu sat down, and the fishermen formed a circle round him; he looked hard at all of them so that they should all see he was going to speak the truth; then he began:

'I left the hunt because Issufu laughed at an old man who was walking along the track with three sheaves of millet on his head. That's the first thing. For the second, remember

Kiry's word: if the hunt takes you far from home, the hippo's head must be given intact to the owners of the water, remember? Right, well, that old man from Bossa Ido, as I have now learnt, is one of the Dô caste¹. So the water in which we killed Issufu's hippo belongs to him. Well, not only did we give him nothing, but Issufu even jeered at him. So this old man's heart was raised in anger, he talked to Dikko, who put a spell on the water. That's why the hippos escaped beneath your canoes, that's why there has already been a man wounded.'

'We must stop the hunt,' said Umaru, 'and talk to this old man. As long as he is against us, we shan't be able to touch a hippo.'

'There you are,' said Chekor, 'and all your son's fault.'

'We mustn't quarrel,' Hermann put in. 'If discord breaks out among us, the old giant will again be the victor.'

'I came with Talu,' said Adamu calmly, 'to get news of the white men and bring you your meat. If the business with the Dô is settled, I'll return to the battle with you. If not—good-night, you Sorkos. There will be deaths, and no one will be able to say that Adamu did not speak the truth.'

'We must see this Dô without delay,' said Hermann, 'and pay whatever he asks.'

Billo Goudel dropped his paddle into his boat and kicked it. 'Dress Issufu's wound, I'm going off to find this Dô. He is my neighbour and will come.'

The three Goudel brothers led the group of fishermen to their compound. Issufu was laid in a hut, where his leg was bandaged, and the women prepared him a herbal broth, since he was slightly feverish. Baraki called his two wives, giving them a sack of dried meat to cook for the Sorkos; then he went to Billo's hut and asked for a sheep, which he killed and carved up on the spot. That night all the Sorkos were the Goudels' guests.

The men lit a fire in the big courtyard adjoining the

¹ Caste of former owners of the river's waters.

Kutugu fishermen's compound; then they put the quarters of mutton on the embers to roast. The chief of the village had sent them large calabashes of sour milk and balls of boiled millet. Talu Mussurani began mixing the pink millet balls in the milk, while Illo described to Adamu the pursuit of the hippos during the past few days.

'If the old Dô doesn't settle this matter, there'll be bad trouble for everybody,' declared Adamu. 'Umaru will have to stop the hunt, and then An'Sara will go off on his own to pursue the old giant.'

'Dyam!' said Talu. 'If An'Sara does that, he will die.'

'And if he doesn't, he will still die,' said Adamu sadly.

'If the old giant doesn't die on this hunt,' Illo observed, 'He'll block the whole river from Ayoru to Labbazenga.'

'My blood against his blood!' cried Chekor. 'Whether the matter is settled or not, I shall go on with the hunt.'

'Well, we, the people of Ayoru, shall leave it,' retorted Abdulai.

'And you'll go back to your village full of shame, and be asked if you haven't a woman's thing here.' Illo pointed to his *Subu*.

'And then afterwards?' asked Umaru. 'If the spirits are stronger than we are, who can gainsay them?'

'I respect you,' said Adamu. 'You are the chief and you have the power, but all this has happened because of Issufu. The evil caused by the son must be made good by the father.'

Umaru remained silent, scratching his head.

'Here they are,' said Talu Mussurani, his eyes wide with fear at the sight of this mighty old Dô.

'Go and fetch An'Sara and Lussu,' said Billo, sitting down by Umaru. The chief greeted the old Dô, who had a wizened face and emaciated legs, and kept his eyes stubbornly lowered.

Hermann and Luc came out of the hut where they had been resting. They shook the old Dô's hand, then lay down on a mat near him. The night was soft as milk, and the moon

lit up their faces. Umaru put his head in his hands, and began to speak very quietly:

'We did not know we had killed a hippo in water belonging to you. If we had known that, we would have given you its head. We would have been to look for you in your village, we would have taken you by the hand and said to you: Look, here is the head, take it, our hearts are happy to give his share to the Dô, owner of the water. But you see, nobody knew. Today I, Umaru, chief of the Sorkos—and I speak for all—offer you my apologies and ask you to mediate with Dikko so that the water is freed, the reeds open up and our harpoons find their mark. Do this, and if there is a price to pay, we will pay it.'

The old man replied, not raising his eyes: 'Wrong has been done, so there is a price to pay. You know the wrong, how can you make it good?'

'It was a great wrong. It is worth more than two sheep.'

'Yes,' said Hermann, 'it's worth a cow.'

'A cow,' said the old Dô. 'Yes, the injury can be wiped out with a cow, but the fisherman's mockery, how can this be wiped out?'

'It was my son,' said Umaru. 'He is wounded, he has paid dearly.'

'No, not for so great a mockery.' He looked up at Umaru for the first time. 'When sons mock fathers, it is not right, not right at all.'

'Forgiveness,' Umaru pleaded. 'He is my son, and a father intercedes for him.'

'Let him go home,' pronounced the old Dô. 'Let him go home full of shame, and have the women mock him. He will see then that mockery is much harder to bear than an injury.'

'Forgive him,' said Umaru again, on the verge of tears. 'If my son does not finish the hunt, the shame will be for him and also for his family.'

Then the voice of Wali the *griot* rose in the night. He sang

the chants of the Dô and his ancestors, and the old man raised his right arm in the air to show the Sorkos that his was the power being celebrated. Then Wali sang the chants of Dikko who ruled over the great river, and the Sorkos' hearts were wrung with emotion, because if the old Dô were willing to forgive, they would once more be stronger than the water of the river, stronger than the whirlpools, stronger than the hippos.

'Here is my word,' said the old Dô. 'Your son may continue hunting! And here is my wish: that you win the battle of the great river! The water will be freed now and you will overcome the hippos.'

Umaru put his hand on the old man's shoulder and shook his arm. 'Thank you, thank you! And let a father have the joy of giving you a white sheep. And let the Sorkos have the pleasure of saying: Come and stay with us, eat with us, drink with us—and all the ill is forgotten!'

He drank from the calabash and handed it to the old Dô, who took a long draught, then passed it to Hermann. They ~~all~~ drank, and the calabashes went round. Then Talu gave them mutton, while Baraki's wives put down three great pots in which the flesh of the enemy was smoking.

Billo went into his hut and returned with a jar of 'Sorko liquor'. It was a secret drink made from stalks of the *burgu*, harsh yet sweet, and it gave courage to the fishermen's hearts.

After that blankets were prepared for the Dô and the Sorkos went to bed, all their strength restored, because the river no longer had a spell on it and victory was now near at hand.

* * *

They were in the sun, and the Rock of Yassani shone ahead of them. The old giant had brought them very far along the great river, before returning down-stream, full of cunning and cruelty. To fight his last battle he had chosen the corner of the river where he was born, the reach of Yassani.

The Niger had gone down, leaving millet stalks uncovered in mid-stream. The dozing waters were glazed over with a heat-mist; the great river slept.

Hermann watched the calm surface from the bow of his canoe, his compact shadow blackening the waters. A deep silence reigned among the high reeds. The canoes moved noiselessly into the *burgu*, forming a semi-circle at about twenty yards distance from each other. Then they closed in towards Damuri, whose canoe was on its own in the centre of a patch of open water. He was pointing to the swamp ahead of him, signalling to the Sorkos that the hippos were there.

Heavy blowing was heard from the swamp in front of Hermann's canoe. On his right a grim-faced Issufu, his knee bandaged, made a sign to his paddler to approach the place where the noise was coming from. The circle quietly closed again, the canoes scarcely rippling the water; poles were not used, lest drops of water should disturb the calm surface.

Then the old giant's head pierced the veil of tranquillity. Like a heap of dark earth, it rose from the river's entrails, leaving Dikko's womb to come into the sun and face the harpoons: there he must fight his last battle, which would bring him death or else give years of peace to the herd's cows and calves. He blinked his eyes, to shake out the drops of water; they prevented his seeing clearly the dark unmoving mass that shut off the sunlight from his view.

Hermann saw the cruel little eyes and the black blade. He hurled a harpoon at the nose. He heard the hippo's breathing, and planted another harpoon between the two eyes. The old giant sprang out of the water with a bellow of rage and charged straight ahead of him. Billo swung the canoe round, but felt the hippo's breath on his shoulders. Hermann hurled his third harpoon, which went into the left foot; then he dropped back into the canoe, while Billo and Suley backed. The hippo was ten yards away from them, and gave a short bellow before swimming straight on. Issufu let him

pass without hurling his harpoon. Mukaila swore at Issufu, and dropping his pole, took a harpoon and planted it in the hippo's rear foot just before he dived. Umaru and Nuhu were already on the trail of the floats. The old giant came up for air, and four harpoons penetrated his neck.

'Eight!—eight harpoons!' yelled Hermann. 'He's hooked now.'

Damuri cut through the path of the floats, and plunged his first harpoon full in the chest. He missed with his second because the old giant was already on them and overturned the canoe in a furious charge. The floats drifted off into mid-stream, while Umaru helped Damuri and Mamadu-of-the-river-bank to get back on the canoe. 'It's nothing, they're all right,' yelled the old chief, and the other canoes continued the chase.

In the middle of the river the floats sank, then rose again about a hundred yards to the right. The old giant was trying to cheat them by changing direction every time he dived. Chekor came up along the *burgu*, followed the floats, and at ten yards sent two harpoons into the hippo's back. The old giant turned to face him, but the canoes had joined up, and now that they were in mid-stream they could manœuvre like a swarm of bees. The old giant received another dozen or so harpoons; he tried to charge, but was hampered by the ropes and floats. Hermann came close and hurled a harpoon at him; it went into the flesh of his neck, and he bellowed.

'An'Sara, get away—get away!' Umaru pointed to the *burgu*. 'Hide, or the old devil will kill you. Escape! He knows you and he's looking for you.'

Hermann smiled wearily, and without saying a word gave the sign to his paddlers. He left the battlefield, and took his canoe off to the *burgu* two hundred yards away from the Sorkos, there to watch the struggle now starting between the old giant and the big boat.

'Adamu is on the boat,' said Suley.

Hermann nodded. 'Yes, he will see the old giant die.'

'But the old giant is your hippo,' said Billo. 'No one will ever forget that.'

'Yes,' said Hermann, 'and when I am dead, all the Sorkos will still remember this old grandfather, father of all the fathers of hippos.'

'Of course,' said Billo. 'Nobody is ever going to forget *him*.'

'He was full of strength and more cunning than Farani Maka,' said Suley, 'but you were stronger than he was.'

'Tonight his mother will weep for him,' said Billo. 'She will have lost the most valiant of her sons.'

Over on the great river the battle continued. The big boat had been secured to the ropes which held the old giant prisoner, and now he was dragging the boat behind him towards the centre of the river. He seemed to gain new strength after each dive.

'We must go back,' said Billo. 'They're going to need me for the kill.' They took their paddles, and returned to the flotilla.

The hippo was swimming and diving in the foam, hauling the boat down by the bows; the blood oozed from all his wounds, trickling along his thick hide and reddening the clear water. The boat rolled from side to side, the men swaying with her. They took an extra turn in the head-rope each time the hippo came up, so as to bring his head as close as possible to the boat's side. At two yards he turned, trying to get hold of the gunwale in his jaws. Billo, who had just leapt on to the boat, now speared him through the ear, to make it bleed and so exhaust him. The spear opened a vein, and a stream of blood spurted out as he dived once more. The boat pitched violently, then the hippo's head came to the surface, and Billo plunged his killer-spear into the neck. The wide blade disappeared, and Billo pressed on the short wooden handle with all his strength. The old giant gave a jerk, and the Sorko let go of his spear to avoid getting his wrist broken. The old giant had stopped swimming, he

seemed hard hit and his strength was declining. Billo asked for another spear so that he could go on striking up to the hilt.

'An'Sara,' said Umaru. 'Won't you escape?'

'No,' Hermann answered, 'I can see this is the end.'

'Yes, it's the end,' agreed the old chief, smiling for the first time in long days. 'Your hippo will die, but don't forget: while there's any life left in him at all, it's you he's looking for.'

'One more hit,' said Billo, 'and the old boy's dead.' Hermann leant over the edge of the big boat, and took the killer-spear which Adamu was holding. He put it down behind him, and made a sign to Suley to go alongside the hippo. The old giant raised his head, looked one last time at the men who were killing him, then plunged his blood-stained face beneath the waters.

Hermann stood up, and planted himself at the side with legs apart. Taking the spear in both hands, he sank it into the hippo's neck, in front of the first spear.

The Sorkos watched the scene without saying a word. He ~~was~~ was entitled to kill, since it was his hippo; but by killing, he ~~was~~ was going against the rules of the hunt: at this minute he should have been far away. The gods, the Sorkos and the hippos knew that the first harpooner was the man pursued, that the first harpooner must take thought for his life by removing himself from the field of battle.

The old giant jerked up as he felt the blade pierce his nerves. He gave a last shake of his head, and the spear flew out, embedding itself in Hermann's thigh. Hermann fell back into the canoe while Suley punted away.

There he lay, struck down in the midst of victory and in the sunshine: conqueror of Dikko, conqueror of the great river—his powerful, massive body defeated, but the strength of his heart still intact and unbroken.

'Hermann!' cried Luc. 'Hermann, you're hurt?' He jumped into the canoe, and saw the blade, wide and flat, a hand's depth in the thigh.

'Try to get it out.'

Luc drew up Hermann's shorts, and pulled gently with one hand, squeezing the lip of the wound. Streams of blood came out in bursts. Tearing off his shirt, Luc rolled it up, thrust it into the middle of the blood, and pressed on it with all his strength.

'Is it bad?' Hermann's nostrils were pinched, and he was visibly growing paler.

'Yes,' said Luc. 'I think it's the artery.'

'My hunt is over,' said Hermann. 'I prefer this hunt to the other. Once I let Idrissa die—once—by being afraid and escaping . . .'

'This was a great hunt,' said Umaru, 'and you are the victor.'

The blood had saturated the shirt, and was now flowing on and on down his thigh, mingling with the water in the bottom of the canoe, reddening the harpoon, reddening the reeds.

'Thank you, Umaru. I thank all the Sorkos.'

'He has had what he desired,' said Umaru.

Hermann shivered, closed his eyes, then opened them. 'Luc, I'm cold.'

'Here,' said Umaru.

Luc took the old chief's blanket, and laid it over Hermann.

The blood was pouring out spasmodically, you could see it spreading over the blanket. There was no way of stopping it, the wound was too deep.

'I'm cold . . . Luc.' Once more he gave his smile full of weariness. Then he closed his eyes.

'He's dead now,' said Billo. Nor did anyone ever know whether he was talking of Hermann or of the old giant of the great river, for both had died simultaneously.

* * *

They washed him in the water of the river, put Dikko's white cloths over him, and four men bore him on their shoulders. For the last time Luc saw him walking the paths

of Firgun. His body was now at rest among the clouds, and the memory of him was here, in the hearts of the Sorkos.

Umaru shook hands with Luc sadly: if it was Hermann's last hunt, it was also Issufu's. By refusing to hurl his harpoon, Issufu had shown disloyalty; he would now be removed from the caste of Sorkos and would have to go back and live with his wife at Ayoru. The old chief himself had condemned his son for this unforgivable crime against friendship and sworn vows; so Umaru's heart was torn with sadness. His grandfather and his father had been chiefs of the Sorkos, but today the line died out, and at his death one of the Goudels would become chief. Thus would the harsh law of river and bush be respected.

The Sorkos had said nothing to Luc. His friend had died in battle, like a harpooner of the great river, in the sun and on his canoe, facing the old giant and never seeking his safety in flight; so there were no words of consolation to bring to the other white man, and it was in silence that they and Luc sorrowfully shook hands.

Afterwards he brought all the three boys together, and distributed Hermann's personal belongings between them. Then he got in the truck, leaving Talu Mussurani and Duma at the entrance to Ayoru. Both were crying, and already the red dust of the track enveloped their frail figures, lost among the thornbushes. These two were going out of his life for months or years or for ever; only God could bring them together once more.

Eight

ON the journey back, Luc had only Adamu and Lam with him. When they were quite near Tilaberi, he suddenly realised that he ought to see the District Commissioner to inform him of Hermann's death.

He stopped the truck outside the Tilaberi rest-house, told the boys to get a meal ready, and went to the D.C.'s office. The D.C. was on trek, but Luc was able to see the Assistant D.C. who handed him a bundle of letters, explaining that he had put off sending them 'because I meant to come and see you at Firgun next week;' also that he had heard something about the hunt and hoped all had gone off well.

'No,' said Luc. 'My friend is dead.'

'Oh dear, I *am* sorry. Could nothing be done for him?'

'No, nothing. He was wounded. The femoral artery was opened. Oh, it was a very quick death—a matter of minutes.'

'You'll sign a declaration for me?'

'Yes.'

'You have witnesses?'

'Yes.'

'Listen, I don't want to give you extra trouble. You sign the declaration, and I'll send two escort-police to collect the witnesses' statements. Do you want us to inform his family?'

'No,' said Luc. 'He didn't have any family. He was alone in the world.' He signed the declaration, and thanked the Assistant D.C., who would have liked him to stay to lunch. Luc declined.

'And what are you going to do now?'

'I don't know,' Luc answered. He felt the bundle of

letters under his arm. 'I'm going to drop two friends at Niamey and then, I suppose, go back . . .'

'To Paris?'

'Yes, to Paris.'

'You'll be taking the plane?'

'Yes, the plane. Perhaps—or else a truck.'

'Ah. Well, there's one of the Trans-Sahara Company's trucks passing the rest-house tonight. If you want to take that, I can arrange it. It's a journey that's well worth doing. The Sahara—and Algeria in seven or eight days!'

'Thanks very much. Look, I'd like to think it over a bit. I'll come and see you again later on.'

'Right, I'll be expecting you.'

On reaching the rest-house, he sat down in the truck, and began to read Hélène's letters. She was lost, and she called to him. He reread the letters, and in his desperate loneliness felt a rebirth of that warm, living presence, wiping out at that moment all the life he had led with Hermann.

The long tracks of red laterite, the nights in the bush, the sun on the great river, and the friendship of free men—all grew blurred in this minute of repudiation: because the memory of a memory shone again, with the distant brightness of a cold moon, like the reflection of a reflection; and memory, so often deceived, could not today remember whether the birth of this impression was due to truth or lies.

He got out of the truck, went into the rest-house, and sat down by Adamu and Lam. 'I'm leaving you today.'

'You're going back to Firgun?' asked Lam.

'No, I'm going off this evening on a Trans-Sahara truck. I'm leaving you the Dodge. You'll be able to drive it, won't you, Lam?'

'Taking it steady, yes. And if I don't have to reverse too much.'

'Go back to Niamey, and sell the truck. Send some of the money to Duma and Talu, and you two share the rest.'

'Thank you,' said Adamu. 'You are generous to us.'

'That'll make a lot of money,' said Lam. 'I'll buy myself a business.'

'I'm taking my bed, a tin trunk and my gun,' said Luc. 'Come over, and we'll see what I'm keeping and what I'm leaving for you.'

Sorting through his things, he found Hermann's watch. He wound it up, and put it on his wrist.

'It must be about three o'clock,' said Adamu.

Luc suddenly felt he had just done something very serious. He was beginning to live like the people of Europe again. The day was now spoken of in twelve hours. He would be getting up at six and having lunch at twelve. He no longer needed to look at the sun, to listen to his stomach and obey his weariness. From now on the watch would think of all that for him.

'What day is it today?'

'We're in April,' said Lam, 'and it's the dry season.'

The three of them ate together for the last time, then Adamu and Lam embraced him.

'You'll come back?' asked Adamu.

'You *must* come back,' said Lam.

'I don't know. Perhaps.'

He felt his throat tightening as he saw them both climb into the old truck. They turned and waved to him. The engine ground into first gear, the Dodge gave a jerk forward, and then he was alone in the cloud of its dust. The tears ran down his cheeks. For a long time he stayed looking at the track; then he went down to the D.C.'s office. 'I've settled everything,' he said, 'so I would like to leave tonight.'

'Good. I'll fix things for you, I'm sure to know the driver. I'll come over to the rest-house about five and wait for him with you. In this heat you'll be travelling mostly by night.'

'Thank you,' said Luc. 'In that case I'll go and get some rest, and I'll be waiting for you up there.'

* * *

The heavy Renault truck arrived at sunset. It was going

north carrying a shooting-brake in the back. The Assistant D.C. was there, and he did know the driver—Saïd, an Arab from Colomb-Béchar, bearded like a *marabout*, who wore a white turban, faded blue overalls, and an orange towel round his neck. The Assistant D.C. introduced him to Luc, and Saïd introduced them to Ali, his mate, a tall African from Beni-Abbès with a beaming smile and a shaved head.

‘You’re leaving straight away?’ asked the Assistant D.C., while Ali was loading Luc’s luggage.

‘I’m just putting in some oil, and then going on. Might as well drive while it’s cool. We’ll rest tomorrow at Ansongo.’

‘Well, goodbye,’ said the Assistant D.C., shaking hands with Luc. ‘Give my regards to the D.C. at Ansongo. You can go and see him if there’s anything at all you need.’

Luc got into the cab next to Saïd. The engine roared, Ali took away the block and jumped into the back. The lorry moved on to the track and gathered speed.

‘This time I’m returning almost empty,’ said Saïd, giving him a sideways glance. ‘You’re in luck, we’ll go much faster than if we had a full load.’

‘I’m not in any hurry.’

‘It’s a good thing not to be in a hurry. On this line you can’t tell the day you’re going to arrive till thirty miles from the end,—or even then!’

‘Have you been doing the line long?’

‘Twenty years. I’m one of the company’s oldest drivers.’

He said this with pride. ‘I’ve spent more nights in the truck or in rest-houses than at my home.’

‘It’s a good life.’

‘It’s a tiring life. You have to be young. Now I’ve got my family waiting for me at Colomb-Béchar, so it’s not quite what it used to be. I was on my own before, I could go anywhere I wanted—like you!’

‘Oh, me! I’m going home.’

‘Going far?’

‘To Paris.’

'And you won't come back to Africa any more?'

'No, I really don't think I shall.'

Saïd stared at the track ahead; he had just turned on his headlights. 'You know,' he said, 'I've seen a lot of them, Europeans, I mean, like yourself—who were going home to Europe. And then a year later, perhaps two years, you saw them coming back here. "Well, Saïd," they'd say to me, "we're back. Africa's a fine country."'

'Yes, it's a fine country,' muttered Luc. 'A tough country, but a fine one.'

He leant back in his seat, and thought how it had been chance that had brought him to Africa but his own will that was making him leave it. If he had never met Hermann, he wouldn't have come to Africa, nor would he be asking these endless soul-destroying questions. He closed his eyes and remembered again how it had all begun. He fell asleep.

The truck slowed down, bumped in another pot-hole, and stopped. Dawn was breaking, and in the distance you could hear the call of the wild fowl in the thorn-bushes.

'We've done a good stretch,' said Saïd; 'time we had something to eat.'

He jumped out of the cab, wiped his face with his towel-sponge, and stretched himself. Ali was already busy collecting firewood. Luc got out and crossed the track to look at the great river.

The still, dark waters seemed to extend on and on for ever. He found it hard to believe that on this great river Hermann's fate could have been played out so swiftly. He felt he would never be able to look at a river without thinking of the shades of Hermann and the old giant, the one only waiting for the other to rise again, both doomed for all eternity to their cruel interwoven destiny.

The great river carved through the bush, but this channel of treacherous waters was as wild and secret as the land it split open; its banks concealed as much fear and brutality as this horizon of thorn-bushes, grass and meagre trees.

Whether it was the violated water or the trampled dust, it was the black man's many-sided bush. The furtive pacts of a temporary peace might open it up to men, but by its very essence it was a perpetual war of hides and teeth, claws and cunning, iron and strength; and those who had been victors were well aware that in the last resort they would still be the vanquished, because it was too unequal a struggle between the black man and the elements. Yet in the end defeat also was unimportant, since in the unceasing battle, kept going on fragile victories, men gave the best of themselves, asking nothing else but the chance to live as complete men.

Luc contemplated the ephemeral victory of the sun, which was just rising. All that men built together, joining in friendship like a protective shield; would fade away in the evening, and everyone knew that the night would conquer them when their course was run. Yet like ants they tirelessly followed their path, as if at the end of everything immortality were promised to them.

He was going to leave Africans and the bush and the great river; he would forget the sun, the night and the gods, to return to his old country. He had long killed his own country in his soul, but the cords that bound him to France were not broken: could not break as long as the warmth of a body, the memory of a look, was not destroyed within him. Here too defeat was unimportant—but he did not want to think of that.

'It's ready!' called Ali.

They drank mint tea, scalding and sweet, and ate cassava cake and dried fish. Ali poured more water in directly they had drunk any tea. When it had no more taste at all, he collected the green leaves at the bottom of the tea-pot and began chewing them. He put out the fire, and threw some water over it; then they drove off again on the main track.

They reached Ansongo in the middle of the morning. Saïd lay down fully dressed on his mat in a corner of the rest-house, and went to sleep almost at once.

Luc visited the D.C. to pass on the greetings from the Assistant D.C. at Tilaberi. He refused an invitation to lunch, feeling utterly lost with another European, utterly remote from all he was coming back to; the idea of two hours' conversation was like a nightmare to him. The welcome was so hospitable, however, that he accepted the offer of an aperitif. The D.C. took him into a low-ceilinged room where the closed shutters made it seem cool but very dark. His wife joined them, and Luc was amazed to be greeting this white-skinned, fair-haired woman with the bright smile and tired eyes. It was months since he had seen a white woman. He watched her sit down and cross her bare legs, she wore white shorts and a pale-blue jumper. Didn't she know that a woman in Africa, whatever her colour or condition, must conceal her thighs if she is not to seem shameless?

She launched straight into the subject of music. 'You haven't missed it too much here?'

'No,' Luc answered, 'I've heard a lot of music.'

'You've got records?'

'Records?'

'Yes, gramophone records, of course,' She looked at him, laughing. 'Unless you play an instrument yourself?'

'I was only talking about African music.'

'You actually like drumming?' She gave a disgusted pout. 'Well, I get the latest hits. Look, would you like to hear Jacqueline François?'

'No. It's very kind of you, but I don't feel I could listen to anything. I'm too tired.' He glanced at the D.C., who was drumming softly on the arm of his chair.

'You must be pleased to be going home?' the D.C. asked.

'Pleased? I don't know.'

'What! You don't know?' exclaimed the wife. 'But listen—you're going back to Paris, aren't you? I'm from Paris. How I miss it! Oh, if only Paul could be transferred to the Ministry at home!' She looked at her husband, and sighed

heavily. Paul grunted his disagreement. He found this country splendid, and did not feel at all anxious for a change.

'You don't like Africa then?'

'Oh, bush, bush, bush!' All at once she seemed out of temper. 'You know, it's no joke for a mistress of the house. The boys don't know how to do anything. You hardly ever see anybody. You get the papers a fortnight late. Well, I mean, all that's just camping, not life!'

Paul had raised his eyes. He looked at Luc, and Luc returned his smile. Paul nodded slowly, as if to say: you see, old chap, how lucky you are to be single, in Africa.

She poured out the drinks, and while they drank, the conversation continued like this in fits and starts. Then Luc took his leave of them.

He went down to the river and remembered that she had said 'You actually like drumming?', and that in her mouth the phrase had become contemptuous. Suddenly he thought of Paris, and pictured himself coming out of a cinema with H  l  ne after they had seen a film about Africa. He remembered H  l  ne's admiration for the film's African music, and now he tenderly thanked her in his mind for her understanding. He saw her there, pale and vehement in the chill of the night, telling him, 'Luc, those people have really got something. One feels quite shattered by them.' But abruptly he also remembered that H  l  ne was often 'feeling quite shattered', and always by things or people 'that had really got something'; she would be just as enthusiastic about a bizarre piece of pottery or a slim volume of esoteric verse—anything or anybody that was strange, unfamiliar. But the enthusiasm was somehow artificial, as far from true affection for its object as the contempt or incomprehension shown by the D.C.'s wife.

What had his life been with H  l  ne? a succession of idle conversations, where talk about action replaced action? A despairing battle in which will-power no longer led men to final fulfilment, their power being limited to an absurd sum

of purposeless acts adding up to nothing, since the common denominator was a denial of their human condition. Mere talk had replaced real words, and now there was nothing more moving on the waters.

What would their life be? A monotonous universe of fixed hours and ready-made tasks, constellated by smoky bars in which Hélène and her like would feed on his return and talk of imaginary journeys in the dismal calm of soft cushions and mournful cafés.

* Suddenly he felt certain that the dice were loaded against him, that he had been allowed to win till then, so that he could more easily be destroyed afterwards. A few years more, and like elderly gentlemen who had been to the colonies in their youth and could talk after dinner of settlers and natives with winks at an indulgent family circle, he also could say: 'When I was in Africa . . .' He felt sick at all that had held him in thrall in past years, realising that the idea, the myth, the will, or whatever name you liked to call it, was the only thing for which you could live in full harmony with your heart; whereas life, as the rest of the world understood it, could in the last resort give only self-disgust and regrets for what might have been.

* * *

They reached Gao in the night. The hotel manager put him into a small room, which was low-ceilinged and cool. The sound of a one-stringed fiddle could be heard rising in the night, and he recognised the thin yet strident music of the bush in Songhai country. After that he remembered the fiery days and cold nights and a whole medley of unfamiliar names staking out the desert: Tabankort, Anéfis, Tessalit, Bordj-le Prieur, Jerry-can 5, Post 250.

Then they came to Reggar, the first oasis after Tanezrouft, awaiting men from the desert with its wells of fresh water, the green swords of its palm-trees and its white hotel with thick walls. He went into the hotel with his six-day beard, his features burned by the sun, his lips cracked and

his voice hoarse. He asked a man to bring in his trunk. The man was near him, a man of his own race, hard-faced and empty-eyed. Luc felt in his pocket, and the man took the trunk, smiling at his tip. Luc realised he had returned to old habits: Europe was already near.

That evening in the bar he saw Saïd drinking with a stranger. Saïd called him, and he went over to their table. 'May I introduce Martinez, another of our drivers. He's come from Béchar and is going down to Gao.'

'I'm crossing the desert again,' said Martinez, 'and again on my own.'

A moth was wheeling round the bar's yellow light. It touched the burning glass and collapsed on their table. Luc's heart was suddenly filled with peace. He was right on the crest of the wave, but he knew now which shore he would land up on. 'This time you won't be on your own,' he said. 'I'm going down with you.'

